



# Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS

MONDAY — 13 DEC 2021



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## Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	12/13 EU: no Olympics diplomatic boycott
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/Sports/wireStory/eu-appetite-join-us-diplomatic-games-boycott-81719468">https://abcnews.go.com/Sports/wireStory/eu-appetite-join-us-diplomatic-games-boycott-81719468</a>
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS -- Several European Union nations have made it clear they have little appetite to join the U.S. initiative for a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Games because of concerns over China's human rights record.</p> <p>EU foreign ministers were seeking a united front on how to handle the issue, following France's position last week that a no-show of leaders and dignitaries at the opening of the Olympics would have little true impact.</p> <p>“Politicizing sporting events like the Winter Olympics does not seem useful to me,” said Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg.</p> <p>German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock told ZDF broadcaster that as little as possible should be taken away from the participants themselves. “Athletes prepare for years, sometimes half their lives, for this, and that's why it should not be used for political issues.”</p> <p>China has dismissed the decision by Canada and the United Kingdom to join Washington’s diplomatic boycott as a “farce” and was not expecting the initiative to garner a worldwide following.</p> <p>Even though the 27 EU nations will send individual teams and the bloc as such will not have its own athletes, the EU foreign ministers want to streamline their participating in the largely symbolic diplomatic dance preceding and at the Feb. 4 opening ceremony for the games.</p> <p>A joint no-show of the 27 nations would add gravitas to U.S. President Joe Biden's initiative, but the EU nations appear hesitant.</p> <p>China has vowed to respond to the U.S. with “firm countermeasures” over the boycott, but has given no details on how it plans to retaliate.</p> <p>Rights groups have called for a total boycott of the Beijing Winter Games, citing Chinese human rights abuses against its Uyghur minority in the northwest Xinjiang region, which some have called genocide. They also point to Beijing’s suppression of democratic protests in Hong Kong and a sweeping crackdown on dissent in the semi-autonomous territory.</p> <p>Schallenberg said it was doubtful that such a diplomatic boycott would benefit the average Chinese much. “Let's keep things in proportion.”</p> <p>Baerbock insisted that China would still remain an important partner to solve global challenges like the climate crisis.</p> <p>Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn said the problem was the EU nations that failed to launch a successful bid for the Winter Games.</p>

	<p>Stockholm and Krakow, Poland, were two EU cities that withdrew bids, while Munich rejected it in a voter referendum. “So we also have to realize that it is indirectly our fault,” that the games went to Beijing instead.</p> <p>Asselborn also backed the position of French President Emmanuel Macron, who said last Friday that “the pain such a boycott could inflict was questionable.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/13 Britain reports first known omicron death</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/britain-omicron-death-variant-coronavirus/2021/12/13/cd87da44-5c0a-11ec-b1ef-cb78be717f0e_story.html">https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/britain-omicron-death-variant-coronavirus/2021/12/13/cd87da44-5c0a-11ec-b1ef-cb78be717f0e_story.html</a>
GIST	<p>LONDON — At least one person has died from the omicron variant, the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Monday as he urged Britons to increase their protection with a booster shot. It is the first reported fatality in the country from the variant.</p> <p>Johnson, who was speaking to reporters during a visit to a vaccination clinic in West London on Monday, said that the omicron variant “was producing hospitalizations and sadly at least one patient has been confirmed to have died with omicron.”</p> <p>“I think the idea that this is somehow a milder version of the virus, I think that’s something we need to set on one side and just recognize the sheer pace at which it accelerates through the population,” he said, adding, “the best thing we can do is all get our boosters.”</p> <p>His comments come amid scenes of long queues outside of clinics as Britons scramble to get their third dose of vaccination. Others who tried to book appointments via the NHS website were told to try again later. Some people said that the NHS website had crashed.</p> <p>On Sunday evening, Johnson announced in a televised address that Britain would try to get booster shots to everyone aged 18 and over by New Year’s Day, bringing forward an earlier deadline by a month. To reach that target, the National Health Service will need to carry out about a million vaccinations a day, double what they are doing now.</p> <p>Britain’s Health Secretary Sajid Javid warned Monday that omicron infections were doubling every two to three days — a “phenomenal” rate, he said.</p> <p>“We’re once again in a race between the vaccine and the virus,” Javid told Sky News. “Two doses are not enough, but three doses still provide excellent protection against symptomatic infection.”</p> <p>On Sunday, Britain reported 1,239 confirmed cases of the omicron mutation, a near doubling of the 633 cases confirmed on Saturday.</p> <p>The British government on Sunday also raised its covid alert level to four, the second highest level on its scale, meaning that there are high or rising levels of transmission.</p> <p>Johnson’s address to the nation was prerecorded, which meant that journalists couldn’t ask him questions about the variant or restrictions or an ongoing scandal about several alleged Christmas parties at Downing Street in 2020 during a time of strict lockdown.</p> <p>The new restrictions coming into effect this week include a call for people who can work from home to do so, wear face masks in most indoor venues, and show proof of vaccines or a negative test for entrance into venues with large crowds. The government also said that daily testing would replace isolating for those who come into contact with someone who has tested positive.</p> <p>Normally, these coronavirus tests can be ordered at no charge on a government website.</p>

	But on Monday morning, the government website read: “Sorry, there are no more home test kits available right now.”
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HEADLINE	<b>12/13 Covid deaths: 1-in-100 for 65yrs or older</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/13/us/covid-deaths-elderly-americans.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/13/us/covid-deaths-elderly-americans.html</a>
GIST	<p>As the <a href="#">coronavirus pandemic</a> approaches the end of a second year, the United States stands on the cusp of surpassing 800,000 deaths from the virus, and no group has suffered more than older Americans. All along, older people have been known to be more vulnerable, but the scale of loss is only now coming into full view.</p> <p>Seventy-five percent of people who have died of the virus in the United States — or about 600,000 of the nearly 800,000 who have perished so far — have been 65 or older. One in 100 older Americans has died from the virus. For people younger than 65, that ratio is closer to 1 in 1,400.</p> <p>The heightened risk for older people has dominated life for many, partly as friends and family try to protect them. “You get kind of forgotten,” said Pat Hayashi, 65, of San Francisco. “In the pandemic, the isolation and the loneliness got worse. We lost our freedom and we lost our services.”</p> <p>Since vaccines first became available a year ago, older Americans have been vaccinated at a much higher rate than younger age groups and yet the brutal toll on them has persisted. The share of younger people among all virus deaths in the United States increased this year, but, in the last two months, the portion of older people has risen once again, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. More than 1,200 people in the United States are dying from Covid-19 each day, most of them 65 or older.</p> <p>In both sharp and subtle ways, the pandemic has amplified an existing divide between older and younger Americans.</p> <p>In interviews across the country, older Americans say that they have continued to endure the isolation and fear associated with the pandemic long after tens of millions of younger and middle-aged people have gone back to work and school and largely resumed normal lives. Older people are still falling seriously ill in great numbers, particularly if they are unvaccinated, and hospitals in the Midwest, New England and the Southwest have been strained with an influx of patients this month. Worried about their risks, and the ongoing warnings from health officials about the added dangers for older people, many of them are still curtailing travel and visits with grandchildren, and are dining out less.</p> <p>“After seeing a couple of people we knew die, we weren’t going to take any chances at all,” Rob Eiring, 70, a semiretired sales executive in Mill Creek, Wash., said of the way he and his wife had responded to the pandemic. “We really retreated. Everything turned inward for us.”</p> <p>The relentless waves of new threats — a surge of the Delta variant and now the new Omicron variant — have been especially stressful for older Americans, prompting some people to consider tightening restrictions on their lives even more, during a period of life when socializing and staying physically and mentally active is considered essential.</p> <p>“People are worried right now,” said Ann Cunningham, 84, who lives in a high-rise designated for seniors in Chicago, where a television room and a community room have remained shut down since March 2020. “If you’ve been inside for a long time, and the only time you talk to somebody is to get your mail or go down to the deli, that is a lot of isolation and loneliness for some people. They feel like nobody in the world cares for them.”</p> <p>At the same time, the push by many companies to have employees return to workplaces is also creating new tension for adults who are older — but still working — and considered at higher risk if they were to get the virus, some experts said. “There’s all these ways — subtle, overt, direct, indirect — that we are not</p>

taking the needs of older people in this pandemic into account,” said Louise Aronson, a geriatrician at the University of California, San Francisco, and author of “Elderhood.”

The pandemic is no longer in the early, dark days of spring 2020, when the mysterious virus was sweeping through nursing homes and assisted living facilities and killing people in staggeringly high numbers, particularly those with pre-existing health issues.

After the first known coronavirus death in the United States in February 2020, the virus’s death toll in this country reached 100,000 people in only three months. The pace of deaths slowed throughout summer 2020, then quickened throughout the fall and winter, and then slowed again this spring and summer.

Throughout the summer, most people dying from the virus were concentrated in the South. But the most recent 100,000 deaths — beginning in early October — have spread out across the nation, in a broad belt across the middle of the country from Pennsylvania to Texas, the Mountain West and Michigan.

These most recent 100,000 deaths, too, have all occurred in less than 11 weeks, a sign that the pace of deaths is moving more quickly once again — faster than at any time other than last winter’s surge.

By now, Covid-19 has become the third leading cause of death among Americans 65 and older, after heart disease and cancer. It is responsible for about 13 percent of all deaths in that age group since the beginning of 2020, more than diabetes, accidents, Alzheimer’s disease or dementia.

The virus deaths of older people have sometimes been dismissed as losses that might have occurred anyway, from other causes, but analyses of “excess deaths” challenge that suggestion. Eighteen percent more older people died of all causes in 2020 than would have died in an ordinary year, according to data from the C.D.C.

“You can say, ‘They would have died anyway’ about any death, because we’re not immortal,” said Andrew Noymer, an associate professor of public health at the University of California, Irvine. “The point is you’re multiplying years of life lost by hundreds of thousands of deaths.”

A year ago, when public health officials in this country began rolling out vaccines against the virus, they made older Americans a priority for shots before most younger people. Older Americans are now the most vaccinated age group in the country: 87 percent of people 65 and older have been fully vaccinated, according to the C.D.C.

Still, many older people who are unvaccinated have died of the virus. And the natural weakening of immune systems and organ function, geriatricians say, leave even vaccinated older people more vulnerable. The most recent available C.D.C. data on deaths among vaccinated people, which does not include those in the past 10 weeks, shows breakthrough deaths to be a small fraction of the nation’s toll. But there is no doubt that breakthrough infections in older people have resulted in some deaths.

Helen Safranek, 68, of Venice, Fla., said her husband, Marc, who was 70, had been fully vaccinated and had received a booster shot three weeks before he became sick with the virus and died in October.

The couple wore masks everywhere, she said, but had felt secure enough after the booster shots to join in card games with other residents of their retirement community. Mr. Safranek had other health problems, including diabetes, but felt assured that even a breakthrough Covid infection would be mild.

“We did everything they told us to,” Ms. Safranek said.

For much of this year, concerns related to the pandemic shifted to the safety of college campuses, workplaces, schools and children too young to qualify for vaccination — even though it was older Americans who were still most at risk from the virus. Throughout the pandemic, some older people said they had often felt that their own autonomy and health were deemed less important than restarting the

economy, reflected in headlines like one in Time magazine in May 2020: “The Road to Recovery: How Targeted Lockdowns for Seniors Can Help the U.S. Reopen.”

“The fact that we’re so concerned about school and school kids and child care, and older people have dropped to the side, it’s just more evidence of our pervasive ageism in our society,” said Elizabeth Dugan, an associate professor of gerontology at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

At the same time, some older people who have spent decades shrugging off traditional notions of age have chafed at the notion that they personally belong to an at-risk group at all, or that people 65 and older can be lumped together. Throughout the pandemic, Billy Simmons, a 71-year-old organic farmer in central Iowa, said that he had not taken public health warnings about his age too seriously, reasoning that he rarely gets sick, never sits around watching television and has been a vegetarian throughout his life.

Mr. Simmons, who decided not to be vaccinated, said he does not pay attention to the public health guidance that people who are older are more vulnerable in the pandemic. “I’m a lot healthier than people I know who are 20 years younger than me,” he said. “I don’t think they talk enough about your level of stamina and healthiness. If you’re 65 and older but very healthy and you eat well and you don’t oversleep, then you might not have so much to be concerned about it.”

Hollis Davenport, who lives on the West Side of Chicago, said that the pandemic had not been difficult to endure, especially when he considers that he no longer has the problems that younger, working people have.

“I used to worry about paying a telephone bill,” said Mr. Davenport, who spends most of his time at home, reading the news or listening to jazz on the radio. “Now I sit here and I meditate and I think about all the things I’ve done, and I get a big laugh. What am I afraid of, at 86?”

But for many, the heightened vulnerability tied to age has forced new discussions about mortality — about peers who have died of the virus, about end-of-life plans and about the swift passage of time.

Simone Mitchell-Peterson, chief executive of the Chicago chapter of Little Brothers — Friends of the Elderly, said that at this point in the pandemic, she could detect a difference in the physical appearance of people her group works with.

“You can see the frailty of our elders,” she said. “Many of them have lost weight. Many of them just look older. Their stoop is a little more pronounced.”

Patt Schroeder, 79, of Oakland, Calif., is one of the millions of older people who soldiered through the pandemic staying active: attending weekly Zoom meetings, including one on racial justice run by her church and another with a loose-knit group of her friends and colleagues who call themselves “The Lovely Ladies.”

They agree that life during the pandemic has been stressful for older adults. But on a recent Friday, their concern turned to the plight of younger Americans.

“Those of us who are older, we know how to keep on keeping on,” Ms. Schroeder said.

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HEADLINE	12/13 PM: Norway to tighten Covid restrictions
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/norway-tighten-covid-restrictions-pm-says-2021-12-13/">https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/norway-tighten-covid-restrictions-pm-says-2021-12-13/</a>
GIST	OSLO, Dec 13 (Reuters) - Norway will further tighten its coronavirus restrictions this week in order to limit the spread of the virus, Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre told news agency NTB on Monday.  "The situation is serious. The spread of infection is too high and we have to take action to limit this development," he said.



Norway is setting record highs both in terms of new COVID-19 infections and in terms of hospitalisations, partly due to the spread of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus.

In a new risk assessment released on Monday, the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (FHI) recommended the government act quickly.

"A lack of action now could lead to large negative consequences for society, not just for health services and municipalities," the FHI wrote.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/13 Europe inflation: workers demand more pay</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/13/business/workers-europe-pay-inflation.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/13/business/workers-europe-pay-inflation.html</a>
GIST	<p>PARIS — The European Central Bank’s top task is to keep inflation at bay. But as the cost of everything from gas to food has soared to record highs, the bank’s employees are joining workers across Europe in demanding something rarely seen in recent years: a hefty wage increase.</p> <p>“It seems like a paradox, but the E.C.B. isn’t protecting its own staff against inflation,” said Carlos Bowles, an economist at the central bank and vice president of <a href="#">IPSO</a>, an employee trade union. Workers are pressing for a raise of at least 5 percent to keep up with a historic inflationary surge set off by the end of pandemic lockdowns. The bank says it won’t budge from a planned a 1.3 percent increase.</p> <p>That simply won’t offset inflation’s pain, said Mr. Bowles, whose union represents 20 percent of the bank’s employees. “Workers shouldn’t have to take a hit when prices rise so much,” he said.</p> <p>Inflation, relatively quiet for nearly a decade in Europe, has suddenly flared in labor contract talks as a run-up in prices that started in spring courses through the economy and everyday life.</p> <p>From Spain to Sweden, workers and organized labor are increasingly demanding wages that keep up with inflation, which last month <a href="#">reached 4.90 percent</a>, a record high for the eurozone.</p> <p>Austrian metalworkers wrested a 3.6 percent pay raise for 2022. Irish employers said they expect to have to lift wages by at least 3 percent next year. Workers at Tesco supermarkets in Britain won a 5.5 percent raise after threatening to strike around Christmas. And in Germany, where the European Central Bank has its headquarters, the new government raised the minimum wage by a whopping 25 percent, to 12 euros (about \$13.60) an hour.</p> <p>The upturns follow a bout of anemic wage growth in Europe. Hourly wages <a href="#">fell for the first time in 10 years</a> in the second quarter from the same period a year earlier, although economists say pandemic shutdowns and job furloughs make it hard to paint an accurate picture. In the decade before the pandemic, when inflation was low, wages in the euro area grew by an average of 1.9 percent a year, according to Eurostat.</p> <p>The increases are likely to be debated this week at meetings of the European Central Bank and the Bank of England.</p> <p>E.C.B. policymakers have insisted for months that the spike in inflation is temporary, touched off by the reopening of the global economy, labor shortages in some industries and supply-chain bottlenecks that can’t last forever. Energy prices, which jumped in November a staggering 27.4 percent from a year ago, are also expected to cool.</p> <p>The E.C.B., which aims to keep annual inflation at 2 percent, has refrained from raising interest rates to slow climbing prices, arguing that by the time such a policy takes effect, inflation would have eased anyway on its own.</p>

“We expect that this rise in inflation will not last,” Christine Lagarde, the E.C.B. president, said in an [interview](#) in November with the German daily F.A.Z., adding that it was likely to start fading as soon as January.

In the United States, where the government on Friday reported that [inflation jumped 6.8 percent](#) in the year through November, the fastest pace in nearly 40 years, officials are not so sure. In congressional testimony last week, the Federal Reserve chair, Jerome H. Powell, stopped using [the word “transitory”](#) to describe how long high inflation would last. The Omicron variant of the coronavirus could worsen supply bottlenecks and push up inflation, he said.

In Europe, unions are also agitated after numerous companies reported bumper profits and dividends despite the pandemic. Companies listed on France’s CAC 40 stock index saw margins jump by an average of 35 percent in the first quarter of 2021, and half reported profits around 40 percent higher than the same period a year earlier.

Workers say that they have not benefited from such gains, and that inflation has made things worse by abruptly slashing their purchasing power. Companies, for their part, are wary of linking salaries to inflation — a policy that also makes the European Central Bank nervous.

Surging energy costs have been “a shock on incomes,” said James Watson, chief economist for Business Europe, the largest business trade association. “But if you try to compensate by raising wages, there’s a risk that it’s unsustainable and that we enter into a wage-price spiral,” he said.

European policymakers are watching carefully for any signs that companies are passing the cost of higher wages on to consumers. If that happens, it could create a dangerous run-up of higher prices that might make inflation chronic.

For now, that seems unlikely, in part because wage negotiations so far haven’t resulted in outsize pay increases, said Holger Schmieding, chief economist at Berenberg Bank in London.

Negotiated wage increases have been averaging around 2.5 percent, below inflation’s current pace. “Will wage hikes be inflationary? Not really,” he said. “The eurozone is not at a severe risk.”

But as climbing prices continue to unnerve consumers, labor organizations are unlikely to ease up. Gasoline prices recently hit €2 a liter in parts of Europe — equal to over \$8 a gallon. Higher transportation costs and supply chain bottlenecks are also making supermarket basics more expensive.

Justine Negoce, a cashier at France’s largest home-improvement chain, joined an unprecedented companywide walkout in Paris last month to demand a hefty raise as rising prices gobbled up her modest paycheck.

After employees blocked warehouses for 10 days and demonstrated in the cold, the company, Leroy Merlin, agreed to a 4 percent raise for its 23,000 workers in France — twice the amount that management originally offered. The company, owned by Adeo, Europe’s biggest DIY chain, saw revenue climb over 5 percent in 2020 to €8 billion as housebound consumers decorated their homes and people like Ms. Negoce worked the front lines to ring up sales.

Her monthly take-home pay will rise in January to €1,300 from €1,250. The additional cash will help offset a 25 percent jump in grocery and gas bills for her two teenage children and husband — just barely.

On a recent trip to the supermarket, her basket of food basics, including rice, coffee, sugar and pasta, jumped to €103 instead of the €70 to €80 she paid a few months back. Filling her gas tank now costs €75 instead of €60. And even with her husband’s modest salary, she said, the couple will still be in the red at the end of the month.



“We’re happy with the raise, because every little bit helps,” Ms. Negoce said. “But things are still tight, and we’ll need to count every penny.”

In a statement, Leroy Merlin said the agreement maintains employees’ purchasing power and puts its average salaries for next year at 15 percent above France’s gross monthly minimum wage, which the government [raised](#) in October by 2.2 percent.

Crucially, executives also agreed to return to the bargaining table in April if a continued upward climb in prices hurts employees.

At Sephora, the luxury cosmetics chain owned by LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton, some unions are seeking an approximately 10 percent pay increase of €180 a month to make up for what they say is stagnant or low pay for employees in France, many of whom earn minimum wage or a couple hundred euros a month more.

LVMH, which recorded revenue of [€44.2 billion](#) in the first nine months of 2021, up 11 percent from 2019, raised wages at Sephora by 0.5 percent this year and granted occasional work bonuses, said Jenny Urbina, a representative of the Confédération Générale du Travail, the union negotiating with the company.

Sephora has offered a €30 monthly increase for minimum wage workers, and was not replacing many people who quit, straining the remaining employees, she said.

“When we work for a wealthy group like LVMH no one should be earning so little,” said Ms. Urbina, who said she was hired at the minimum wage 18 years ago and now earns €1,819 a month before taxes. “Employees can’t live off of one-time bonuses,” she added. “We want a salary increase to make up for low pay.”

Sephora said in a statement that workers demanding higher wages were in a minority, and that “the question of the purchasing power of our employees has always been at the heart” of the company’s concerns.

At the European Central Bank, employees’ own worries about purchasing power have lingered despite the bank’s forecast that inflation will fade away.

A spokeswoman for the central bank said the 1.3 percent wage increase planned for 2022 is a calculation based on salaries paid at national central banks, and would not change.

But with inflation in Germany at 6 percent, the Frankfurt-based bank’s workers will take a big hit, Mr. Bowles said.

“It’s not in the mentality of E.C.B. staff to go on strike,” he said. “But even if you have a good salary, you don’t want to see it cut by 4 percent.”

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HEADLINE	12/13 Covid anxiety, depression take hold
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/13/world/covid-omicron-depression-lockdowns.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/13/world/covid-omicron-depression-lockdowns.html</a>
GIST	<p>PARIS — A recent <a href="#">cartoon</a> in the French daily Le Monde featured a bedraggled man arriving at a doctor’s office for a Covid-19 vaccine. “I am here for the fifth shot because of the third wave,” he says. “Or vice versa.”</p> <p>His bewilderment as France suffers its fifth wave of the pandemic, with cases of the Delta variant rising sharply along with Omicron anxiety, captured a mood of exhaustion and simmering anger across the world two years after the deadly virus began to spread in China.</p>

Uncertainty bedevils plans. Panic spreads in an instant even if, as with the Omicron variant, the extent of the threat is not yet known. Vaccines look like deliverance until they seem a little less than that. National responses diverge with no discernible logic. Anxiety and depression spread. So do loneliness and screen fatigue. The feeling grows that the Covid era will go on for years, like plagues of old.

Even in China, with no reported Covid deaths since January, some confess weariness with the measures that have kept them safe when so many others perished.

“I’m so tired of all these routines,” Chen Jun, 29, a tech company worker in the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen, said the other day. He was forced to take three Covid-19 tests in June following an outbreak in the city, and then had to quarantine for 14 days. Thumbtacks he used to pin on a world map to trace his travels have stopped multiplying. “I’m starting to think we’ll never see an end to the pandemic.”

This sense of endlessness, accompanied by growing psychological distress leading to depression, was a recurrent theme in two dozen interviews conducted in Asia, Europe, Africa and the Americas. After two years of zigzagging policy and roller coaster emotions, terrible loss and tantalizing false dawns, closing borders and intermittently shuttered schools, people’s resilience has dwindled.

That is sure to pose new challenges for leaders trying to protect their people and their economies. Will the weary obey new restrictions, or risk seeing family and friends after months of forced separation? The question of just how draconian leaders can be when people’s mental health has become so fragile appears to be a core dilemma as the pandemic enters its third year.

“I know it will only get worse, it won’t stop, the pandemic will only turn more life-consuming,” said Natalia Shishkova, a teacher in Moscow. “It is all chaos, like a fantasy film. You watch all these apocalypse films and realize their writers were real prophets.”

Real progress in fighting the virus has been made. A year ago, vaccine rollouts were in their infancy. Today, about 47 percent of the world’s population is inoculated. If case numbers remain high, death rates have plunged. Yet life seems out of control.

The pandemic not only makes this month’s vacation or holiday celebrations seem uncertain, but also sometimes overwhelms understanding. How to assess the avalanche of statistics, opinions, warnings, closures, reopenings? What to make of the big business Covid-19 has become, with its vested interests? What to do about the glaring inequality in vaccine distribution? How to avert one’s gaze from the discarded masks that still dot streets, the pandemic’s perennial detritus?

Once linear, life now seems circular. Schools open. They close again. Travel becomes easier, only for new obstacles to arise. Sickness from Covid-19 subsides, to be replaced by long Covid and now indications that even those who have recovered from the virus might get reinfected with Omicron. At the Paris laboratory of Maria Melchior, a French epidemiologist who specializes in mental illness, in-person meetings had just been reinstated when, this week, she was told they would cease, with a return to Zoom gatherings.

“We no longer know when we will get back to normal,” Ms. Melchior said. And what is normal now? She paused. “Well, at least a life without masks.”

In Kenya, with infections declining in October, President Uhuru Kenyatta lifted a longstanding curfew. Bars filled. Musicians lined up concert dates, as they have in many parts of the world, where theaters and opera houses have also reopened. Spirits rose.

Then, the Omicron variant hit. Even before any cases were reported there, Kenya’s leaders announced plans to bar unvaccinated people from offices and warned of new holiday-season restrictions.

Corrie Mwende, a communications specialist in Nairobi, said she had felt like “freedom was coming back” after a long period when “you could say it was like the end of the world.”

Today she is unsure her hope will be fulfilled.

Such hesitation is pervasive. The pandemic began with evasiveness from the great powers of the 21st century, first President Xi Jinping's China and then President Donald J. Trump's America. Trust was dented, time lost. Ever since, a cohesive global response has appeared elusive.

China has pursued a zero Covid policy, virtually shutting its borders and deploying mass-testing, snap lockdowns and high-tech contact tracing. At the other extreme, Russia, despite a high rate of deaths, has done little to restrict movement.

The 27-nation European Union is split over whether to make vaccines obligatory, and policies vary widely: soccer stadiums are empty again in Germany, where infection rates have surged, but full in France, where they have, too, but a presidential election looms in four months.

Britain, under Prime Minister Boris Johnson, has veered between herd immunity temptations and the kind of periodic restrictions now in force again to combat the Omicron variant.

In Brazil, whose president, Jair Bolsonaro, has persistently minimized the pandemic's threat, the death toll has plunged to fewer than 300 a day from 3,000 in April. Samba concerts are back in the streets. Fireworks, after some back-and-forth, will light the sky over Copacabana beach to mark the New Year — unless some new disaster strikes.

Maybe that will be Omicron; maybe not. Some other variants have come and gone without driving the pandemic to terrifying new heights.

For now, every plan is a provisional plan.

Conspiracy theories abound, in part because the pandemic has enriched the wealthy as markets have soared, and punished those without investments.

Yakov Kochetkov, head of the Center for Cognitive Therapy in Moscow, said, "In Russia there has been a strong increase in mistrust of vaccines, even the term 'pandemic' itself. This greatly affects the psyche."

Just this month, a 45-year-old man reported to view the pandemic as a conspiracy opened fire at a Russian government office and killed two people after being told to put on a mask.

Anna Shepel, a Russian therapist, has observed her patients' "obsessive thoughts, obsessive actions, fear of getting infected, fear of touching anything in public places."

Nevertheless, in a country with a deep vein of fatalism and stoicism, President Vladimir V. Putin has faced little criticism for his relatively lax response to the coronavirus.

In Italy, hit to devastating effect early in the pandemic, access to everything from movie theaters to offices has been strictly curtailed for anyone who does not have the "green pass" of the vaccinated. The government is promising a "semi-normal" Christmas without the need to resort to lockdowns. Still, the mood of the country is somber.

Massimiliano Valerii, the director general of CENSIS, a Rome-based research group, observed that the pandemic had exacerbated anxieties about the future. "The social ladder has been blocked, the mechanism for being able to improve one's position in life," he said.

David Lazzari, the president of Italy's psychologists' guild, said recent studies in Italy showed the incidence of anxiety and depression had doubled since the pandemic began. For those under 18, levels had reached 25 percent. "One in four," he noted. "That's very high."

Among adolescents and young adults — stuck on their screens, often unable to date over the past two years, inundated with online friends but short of actual contact — anorexia and bulimia have spread, said Ms. Melchior, the French epidemiologist who focuses on mental illness.

In France, she added, depression and anxiety are at about twice normal levels, in line with the Italian findings and a recent report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

The surgeon general in the United States warned recently that young people are facing “devastating” mental health effects as a result of the pandemic and other challenges experienced by their generation.

Chanel Contos, 23, an Australian student in London who is uncertain whether she will be able to fly home this month, expressed acute frustration at having been told that “once we had adequate vaccines in the country you’re in, things would be OK.”

She asked a question frequently heard among her generation: “How much of our lives can we give up for this?”

Governments are acutely aware of this frustration. Nicolas Franck, a French psychiatrist, said, “We fell short initially, now we are in the phase of excess precaution.”

“People are so exhausted their greatest fear is not so much a new variant but a new curfew,” he added.

China, through its extreme measures, has been determined to move on. But a sense of normalcy remains elusive, and the second anniversary of the day the first reported patient experienced symptoms in Wuhan did not pass without comment.

Hundreds of people posted messages on the social media account of Li Wenliang, a doctor in Wuhan who many consider a martyr for the official threats he received over his online attempts to warn friends — and by extension the world — of a strange new disease ravaging his hospital.

“I can’t believe that we have been wearing masks now for two years,” one commenter wrote. Another message reads: “Dr. Li, it’s been two years and the pandemic is not only still here but it’s getting more intense.”

Dr. Li’s account has become known as China’s “Wailing Wall” — a place where people grieve and seek solace for all that has been lost in a remote world.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/12 Inflation high, but some relief coming?</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/inflation-painfully-high-relief-coming-81709170">https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/inflation-painfully-high-relief-coming-81709170</a>
GIST	<p>NEW YORK -- Inflation is painfully high, but this hopefully is close to as bad as it gets.</p> <p>Consumer prices rose 6.8% for the 12 months ending in November, a 39-year high. Many economists expect inflation to remain near this level a few more months but to then moderate through 2022 for a variety of reasons. And they don't see a repeat of the 1970s or early 1980s, when inflation ran above 10% for frighteningly long stretches.</p> <p>Households could even see relief in some areas within weeks. Prices have dropped on global markets for crude oil and natural gas, which is filtering into lower prices at the pump and for home heating. That should keep inflation somewhat in check, even if prices keep rising elsewhere in the economy.</p> <p>To be sure, economists say inflation will likely stay higher than it was before the pandemic, even after it eases through 2022. More often than not in the last 10 years, inflation was below 2%, and it even scraped below zero during parts of 2015. The bigger danger then was too-low inflation, which can also lead to a weak economy.</p>

“This is not going to be an easy fix,” said Nela Richardson, chief economist at ADP. “Just because inflation will eventually moderate doesn’t mean that prices are going to go down. They’re up. We’re just lowering the rate of change, not the level of prices.”

Russell Price, chief economist at Ameriprise, expects inflation to peak at 7.1% in December and January, for example. After that, he expects the inflation rate to fall toward 4% by the summer and below 3% by the end of the year, but to stay above 2% through 2023.

One reason for the moderation, he said, is improving supply chains. They had become ensnarled when the global economy suddenly returned to life following its brief shutdown, and economists hope increasing availability of everything from computer chips to shipping containers will help inflation to ease.

“It’s in no one’s interests to have the supply chain as disruptive as it has been,” Price said.

Then there’s the Federal Reserve. Wall Street expects the Fed to say this upcoming week that it will accelerate its exit from a monthly bond-buying program meant to support the economy. That would open the door for it to begin raising short-term interest rates.

Both the bond buying and low rates are intended to spur borrowing, which gets people and companies to buy more things. That can help drive inflation higher, as demand outstrips supply.

The U.S. government will also potentially offer less aid to households in 2022, whether that’s through child tax credit payments or beefed-up unemployment benefits. That could also lead to fewer purchases by Americans, further lessening the pressure on inflation.

Most immediately, Americans should see swings in inflation via energy costs.

A gallon of regular gasoline has fallen about 2.4% over the last month, to a little less than \$3.35 per gallon on Friday, according to AAA. That’s progress, though drivers are still paying far higher prices than last year, when a gallon of regular was only \$2.16.

The U.S. Energy Information Administration forecasts gasoline will drop again to an average of \$3.13 in December and to \$2.88 for all of 2022 after averaging \$3.39 last month, the highest since 2014.

“That should provide some relief for consumers when they go to fill up their tanks. Now how much relief? That’s really hard to tell,” said Andrew Gross, spokesman for AAA. “It’s really hard to gauge what sort of world events are happening. And it really doesn’t take much to spike oil prices.”

Oil prices have dropped for a number of reasons. On one side, nations have made agreements to boost oil supplies. On the other, the omicron variant of the coronavirus dented expectations for demand on worries it would cause lockdowns and canceled travel. Benchmark U.S. crude oil has fallen nearly 15% since the start of November.

Home heating costs are also likely to be lower than projected, although bills will still likely be higher than last year, as prices for natural gas fall with other fuels on global markets.

The average cost to heat a home this winter will be an estimated \$972, according to Mark Wolfe, executive director of the National Energy Assistance Directors Association. That’s less than the \$1,056 his group was projecting in October, but still higher than the \$888 consumers paid to heat their homes last year.

“This is a consumer beware situation,” Wolfe said. “Don’t get your hopes up that prices are going to come down to last year’s levels.”

Perhaps the biggest wildcard in where inflation is heading is what happens with workers’ wages.

	<p>Workers across the country are fighting for higher pay. Deere &amp; Co. employees recently won a deal that will deliver 10% raises immediately, for example.</p> <p>Usually, companies will try to pass such increases along to their customers through higher prices. And with the unemployment rate low and companies chasing after workers — there were nearly 1.5 job openings at the end of October for every person on unemployment — the pressure may be building for faster wage gains.</p> <p>On top of that is whether the spike already seen in inflation will scare U.S. households into speeding up purchases to get ahead of any further price increases. That could create its own feedback loop, driving prices higher.</p> <p>“We’ve seen a real awareness on Main Street that prices have gone up,” ADP's Richardson said.</p> <p>“It's a concern because when you're battling inflation on multiple fronts — it's not just the supply chain, it's not just the labor market shortages, but now you've got the consumer who's in the mix — it just increases the difficulty in bringing inflation under control.”</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/12 Community honors Seattle deputy fire chief</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/seattle/community-honors-seattle-deputy-fire-chief-who-died-on-hunting-trip/281-5e339445-fe33-4161-9d58-320a36633de5">https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/seattle/community-honors-seattle-deputy-fire-chief-who-died-on-hunting-trip/281-5e339445-fe33-4161-9d58-320a36633de5</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>BELLEVUE, Wash. — Seattle Deputy Fire Chief Jay Schreckengost, who died during a hunting trip in November, was honored during a funeral service in Bellevue on Sunday.</p> <p>Citing an "incredibly difficult" few months, the Seattle Fire Department tweeted, "Rest in Peace Jay, we'll take it from here."</p> <p>Schreckengost's body was found on Nov. 14, more than a week after he went missing in eastern Washington.</p> <p>"Jay had a heart for service. He cared about the community," Seattle Fire Chief Harold Scoggins said. "You don't continue to do something for 31 years and not care. He served well."</p> <p>A forensic investigation ordered by the coroner revealed Schreckengost sustained multiple injuries including a broken wrist and a broken spine.</p> <p>Further investigation in the area where Schreckengost was found led investigators to believe Schreckengost fell down a steep hillside or cliff face, according to a release from the Kittitas County. There was snow on the ground when Schreckengost went to scout for elk on the morning of Tuesday, Nov. 2, making the nearby terrain slick, according to Kittitas County officials.</p> <p>Crews described the surrounding terrain as "steep" and "slippery" in some areas which require help from mountain technical rescue personnel. Schreckengost was described as an experienced hunter and outdoorsman. He was believed to be well-equipped for the trip.</p> <p>The search for Schreckengost included 60 different agencies and organizations and thousands of hours from professional and trained volunteer searchers.</p> <p>"We are incredibly saddened by this news and are all grieving the loss of one of our own," a statement from Seattle Fire read. "Deputy Chief Schreckengost was a husband, father and friend to all, and our hearts are with his family right now who have been at the site every day searching alongside search and rescue, fire and law enforcement agencies."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/12 'Toys for Tots' scramble help more children</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.king5.com/article/life/holidays/toys-for-tots-scrambles-to-help-more-children-in-western-washington/281-1c23a1d0-50a1-4bbc-9395-390f5c1a1394">https://www.king5.com/article/life/holidays/toys-for-tots-scrambles-to-help-more-children-in-western-washington/281-1c23a1d0-50a1-4bbc-9395-390f5c1a1394</a>
GIST	<p>TUKWILA, Wash. — It's the final push for many nonprofit organizations like Toys for Tots that help with toy drives.</p> <p>The COVID-19 pandemic put a damper on efforts to help families last year and continues to cause problems this year. Supply chain issues are adding a new wrinkle to the situation, as many nonprofits say they've seen an increase in requests.</p> <p>Representatives with <a href="#">Toys for Tots King County</a> said their donations were so low in 2020 they couldn't meet all 65,000 requests they received. It was daunting when they were hit with 130,000 requests for 2021.</p> <p>Toys for Tots works with a network of 180 nonprofits that get the donations to the families, that's an increase from 2020. A team of Marines and volunteers help make it happen at a warehouse in Tukwila where they sort and distribute donations.</p> <p>Gunnery Sgt. Edward Chapman's team has worked on this around the clock.</p> <p>“We've distributed over 2,000 boxes to hundreds of businesses in King County and they're going to be returning them by Wednesday,” Chapman said.</p> <p>They're putting those military skills to use in service for kids. A few days ago, they had four bikes. They worked to get the number close to 100 but say they would need hundreds more to get close to how many have been requested from local nonprofits.</p> <p>Supply chain problems are not making the situation easier.</p> <p>“Some people have ordered bikes and they're waiting to receive them. Hopefully, we can get them here by Wednesday,” Chapman said.</p> <p>They're also low on toys for babies and teens.</p> <p>The Johnson family dropped off donations at the warehouse Sunday.</p> <p>“We try to do service that's in their capacity so it's not always the big things, but little things like them picking out a toy for this,” Kristen Johnson said.</p> <p>Each of the Johnson children picked a toy for a child their age, including fifth grader Sydney.</p> <p>“We thought about what they would like and not just something for us,” Sydney said.</p> <p>The push is on as they wait for those final boxes to return Wednesday. They Hope the bins have enough donations to make their mission of love a success.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/12 Avalanche risk remains high in Cascades</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/avalanche-risk-still-high-after-crystal-mountain-fatality/I35T6AE7DJFNVLN4ZDZAVK5AYI/">https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/avalanche-risk-still-high-after-crystal-mountain-fatality/I35T6AE7DJFNVLN4ZDZAVK5AYI/</a>
GIST	<p>The avalanche risk remains high in the Cascades, a day after a backcountry skier died at Crystal Mountain.</p> <p>Forecasters with Northwest Avalanche Center and Crystal Mountain Ski Patrol spent this Sunday investigating the fatal avalanche on the ground.</p>

This, as the avalanche risk throughout the North Cascades remains at a three out of five.

Although it has been snowing all day here at Snoqualmie Summit, the roads seem to have held up well. Interstate 90 is still bare and wet.

That's good news because a lot of people have come up here just to see all of this snow.

A large amount of snow at Snoqualmie Summit means a lot of shoveling for a new worker with the Washington State Department of Transportation.

"Yeah, that's OK," said Deanna Reynolds who got her highway worker job last month. "Boy, this snow is really light today."

As for the shoveling work? "Oh, it's OK," she said, smiling. "You know it comes with the territory."

And it was the beautiful terrain that so many stopped to see. The visitors included Chris Perry and her daughter, Amanda, who were both driving back home from Pullman.

"Loving it," said Chris. "We decided to stop and play in the snow on our way home."

"Just walk around," said Amanda, about their plans. "I wanted to throw a snowball at her but she said no."

But there can be a dark side to the heavy snowfall, too.

The recent heavy snowfall turned deadly at the Crystal Mountain resort Saturday. A 66-year-old backcountry skier died when his party of six triggered an avalanche in the Silver Basin, an area the resort had made off-limits for fear of an avalanche.

Now forecasters from Northwest Avalanche Center and Crystal Mountain Ski Patrol are investigating to figure out what went wrong.

"Even though the bulk of the storm is over, we are still experiencing kind of that elevated level of caution and avalanche danger overall," said Dennis D'Amico, NWAC's lead forecaster. "So, not just for the Crystal area, but for really the entire Cascade region."

And the danger is not just up high. This SUV spun out of control on I-90 just west of the summit. Adriane Lynch, who lives in Spokane, witnessed it.

"So, we knew better than to drive speedily in these conditions," said Adriane Lynch. "And he was just going shoom! And that was it."

That's how quickly accidents can happen.

There is good news for skiers. The Summit at Snoqualmie will open Tuesday and Wednesday for passholders. The resort's operations will be limited but you can still ski.

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HEADLINE	12/13 Masks come off; rallies begin in India
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/india/masks-come-off-rallies-begin-indias-covid-19-patient-load-falls-2021-12-13/">https://www.reuters.com/world/india/masks-come-off-rallies-begin-indias-covid-19-patient-load-falls-2021-12-13/</a>
GIST	NEW DELHI, Dec 13 (Reuters) - India reported its lowest tally of active COVID-19 cases in 18 months on Monday, but a sharp drop in the use of protective face masks is causing concern after a rise in the number of infections with the Omicron variant.

	<p>Many people have been standing or sitting close to each other without masks, or covering only their chins, at big rallies held by political parties in several states before elections. Something similar happened before the Delta variant ravaged India from April.</p> <p>Cases have come down sharply since then, with an active COVID-19 total of 91,456 as of early Monday, the lowest in 561 days, according to the Health Ministry.</p> <p>But cases of the Omicron variant have risen to at least 36 in India, and accounted for 3% of the virus sequences analysed in the country in the past two weeks, with Delta accounting for the rest. Health authorities have been urging people to cover their mouths in public.</p> <p>"The falling graph of mask use could cost us," top Indian health official Vinod Kumar Paul told a recent news briefing. "Mask is a universal vaccine, works on every variant."</p> <p>Mask-wearing in public has fallen to levels last seen in March, before the second wave of cases, data from the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation shows. Current mask-wearing is estimated at 59%, nearly the same as in March, having peaked at 81% in May.</p> <p>The country reported 7,350 new COVID-19 cases on Monday, taking the total to 34.69 million. Deaths rose by 202 to 475,636.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/13 WHO: omicron poses 'very high' global risk</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/omicron-poses-very-high-global-risk-data-severity-limited-who-2021-12-13/">https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/omicron-poses-very-high-global-risk-data-severity-limited-who-2021-12-13/</a>
GIST	<p>GENEVA, Dec 13 (Reuters) - The Omicron coronavirus variant, reported in more than 60 countries, poses a "very high" global risk, with some evidence that it evades vaccine protection but clinical data on its severity is limited, the World Health Organization says.</p> <p>Considerable uncertainties surround Omicron, first detected last month in southern Africa and Hong Kong, whose mutations may lead to higher transmissibility and more cases of COVID-19 disease, the WHO said in a technical brief issued on Sunday.</p> <p>"The overall risk related to the new variant of concern Omicron remains very high for a number of reasons," it said, reiterating its first assessment of Nov. 29.</p> <p>It added there were early signs that vaccinated and previously infected people would not build enough antibodies to ward off an infection from Omicron, resulting in high transmission rates and "severe consequences".</p> <p>It remains unclear for now whether the new lineage is also inherently more contagious than the dominant Delta variant, which would fuel its spread further, WHO warned.</p> <p>Corroborating the WHO's assessment, University of Oxford researchers published a lab analysis on Monday saying that two two-dose COVID-19 vaccine regimens do not induce enough neutralising antibodies against Omicron.</p> <p>While the antibody defences from courses from AstraZeneca (AZN.L) vaccine and BioNTech/Pfizer have been undermined, there is hope that T-cells, the second pillar of an immune response, can at least prevent severe disease by attacking infected human cells.</p> <p>The Oxford researchers said there was currently no evidence of Omicron causing more severe disease.</p> <p>Pfizer and BioNTech have said two shots of their vaccine may still protect against severe disease, because its mutations were unlikely to evade the T-cells response.</p>

	<p>The WHO cited some preliminary evidence that the number of people getting reinfected with the virus has increased in South Africa.</p> <p>While early findings from South Africa suggest that Omicron may be less severe than the Delta variant - currently dominant worldwide - and all cases reported in the Europe region have been mild or asymptomatic, it remained unclear to what extent Omicron may be inherently less dangerous, it said.</p> <p>"More data are needed to understand the severity profile," it said. "Even if the severity is potentially lower than for the Delta variant, it is expected that hospitalisations will increase as a result of increasing transmission. More hospitalizations can put a burden on health systems and lead to more deaths."</p> <p>Further information was expected in coming weeks, it added, noting the time lag between infections and outcomes.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/13 Britain: omicron spreading 'phenomenal rate'</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/britain-says-omicron-spreading-phenomenal-rate-2021-12-13/">https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/britain-says-omicron-spreading-phenomenal-rate-2021-12-13/</a>
GIST	<p>LONDON, Dec 13 (Reuters) - Britain said on Monday that the Omicron coronavirus variant was spreading at a "phenomenal rate" and now accounted for about 40% of infections in London, so people should get a booster shot because the double-vaccinated are still vulnerable.</p> <p>Since the first Omicron cases were detected on Nov. 27 in the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has imposed tougher restrictions and told the nation on Sunday that a "tidal wave" of Omicron was coming.</p> <p>Britain says that unless action is taken there could be a million people infected with Omicron by the end of the month.</p> <p>"It's spreading at a phenomenal rate, something that we've never seen before, it's doubling every two to three days in infections," Health Secretary Sajid Javid told Sky News.</p> <p>"That means we're facing a tidal wave of infection, we're once again in a race between the vaccine and the virus."</p> <p>The pound fell 0.4% to \$1.3225, while it was broadly steady against the euro at 85.29 pence. <a href="#">read more</a></p> <p>Johnson, who is grappling with a rebellion in his party over measures to curb Omicron and an outcry over alleged parties at his Downing Street office during last year's lockdowns, said people should rush to get booster vaccines to protect "our freedoms and our way of life".</p> <p>After COVID-19 was first detected in China in late 2019, he faced criticism for initially resisting lockdown.</p> <p>He has also been criticised for overseeing mistakes in transferring patients into care homes, and for building a costly test-and-trace system that failed to stop a deadly second wave.</p> <p>Johnson has repeatedly said that while mistakes were made, the government was making decisions at pace in the biggest public health crisis for generations and that his government was swift to roll out vaccines.</p> <p>Across the world, COVID has killed 5.3 million people, wiped out trillions of dollars in economic output and turned normal life upside down for many. In the United Kingdom, more than 146,000 people have died from COVID.</p> <p><b>'TIDAL WAVE'</b></p>

As Johnson tries to stem the spread of Omicron, he faces growing anger from libertarians in his party over stiffer COVID rules and sinking poll ratings.

He has faced criticism over his handling of a sleaze scandal, the awarding of lucrative COVID contracts, the refurbishment of his Downing Street flat and a claim he intervened to ensure pets were evacuated from Kabul during the chaotic Western withdrawal in August.

An Ipsos MORI survey for The London Evening Standard newspaper showed opposition Labour leader Keir Starmer's ranking was 13 percentage points ahead of Johnson, the first time a Labour leader had been viewed as a more capable prime minister since 2008.

It also echoed other polls by showing Labour up three points on 39% ahead of Johnson's Conservatives, who were down one point since the last survey in November on 35%.

Javid said although there had been no deaths confirmed in England and just 10 people hospitalised with the Omicron variant, its swift spread meant that unless the government acted the health service could be overwhelmed.

"Two doses are not enough, but three doses still provide excellent protection against symptomatic infection," Javid said.

The government wants to offer all adults a booster by New Year, an ambitious target given the Christmas holiday and that vaccinating 1 million people per day is around double the current 530,000 per day.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/13 Hong Kong activists jailed; banned vigil</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/china/hong-kong-activists-get-up-14-months-prison-banned-tiananmen-vigil-2021-12-13/">https://www.reuters.com/world/china/hong-kong-activists-get-up-14-months-prison-banned-tiananmen-vigil-2021-12-13/</a>
GIST	<p>HONG KONG, Dec 13 (Reuters) - Eight Hong Kong pro-democracy activists were sentenced to up to 14 months in prison on Monday for organising, taking part in and inciting participation in a banned vigil last year for victims of China's 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown.</p> <p>The former British colony, which returned to Chinese rule in 1997 with the promise of wide-ranging freedoms, traditionally holds the largest June 4 vigil in the world, but police have rejected applications for the last two vigils, citing coronavirus restrictions.</p> <p>Critics said authorities used the pandemic restrictions as an excuse to block the commemoration. The city government rejected that.</p> <p>The sentencing is the latest blow to the city's democracy movement, which has seen dozens of activists arrested, jailed or flee the Chinese-ruled territory since Beijing imposed a sweeping national security law last year.</p> <p>Judge Amanda Woodcock said the defendants "ignored and belittled a genuine public health crisis" and "wrongly and arrogantly believed" in commemorating June 4 rather than protecting the health of the community.</p> <p>Media tycoon Jimmy Lai, 74, who is already in jail, barrister Chow Hang Tung, 36, and activist Gwyneth Ho, 31, received sentences of 13, 12 and 6 months, respectively. They were found guilty by the court last Thursday.</p> <p>The three, the highest profile of the eight, had pleaded not guilty to all charges.</p>

"If commemorate (sic) those who died because of injustice is a crime, then inflict on me that crime and let me suffer the punishment of this crime, so I may share the burden and glory of those young men and women who shed their blood on June 4th to proclaim truth, justice and goodness," Lai said in a mitigation letter, handwritten in prison, ahead of sentencing.

Chow, in her mitigation said: "If those in power had wished to kill the movement with prosecution and imprisonment, they shall be sorely disappointed. Indeed what they have done is breathe new life into the movement, rallying a new generation to this long struggle for truth, justice and democracy."

Five others who had pleaded guilty, including Lee Cheuk-yan, leader of the now-disbanded vigil organiser Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements in China, were sentenced to between just over 4 months and 14 months.

"If there was a provocateur, it is the regime that fired at its own people," an emotional Lee, who received the highest sentence of 14 months, told the court on Nov. 17.

"If I must go to jail to affirm my will, then so be it."

All sentences will be served concurrently with any the defendants are already facing in other cases.

Sixteen other activists are already serving sentences of 4-10 months related to the 2020 vigil. Two democracy campaigners facing similar charges over the vigil, Nathan Law and Sunny Cheung, have fled Hong Kong.

After mass pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong in 2019, the global financial hub has taken a swift authoritarian turn with Beijing's imposition of a sweeping national security law last year impacting many aspects of life in the city.

China has never provided a full account of the 1989 crackdown on protest there that centred on Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

The death toll given by officials days later was about 300, most of them soldiers, but rights groups and witnesses say thousands of protesters may have been killed.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/13 Ethiopia: military leader killed in fighting</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-yemen-houthis-0e932f8eb9171385df9b2ee60beadc6c">https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-yemen-houthis-0e932f8eb9171385df9b2ee60beadc6c</a>
GIST	<p>CAIRO (AP) — Clashes between Yemeni government forces and the country's Houthi rebels attacking the key central city of Marib killed a senior military commander on Monday, officials said.</p> <p>The development is a big blow to the forces of Yemen's internationally recognized government, which have been fighting for months against the Iranian-backed Houthis' attempt to take Marib. The Houthis launched an offensive earlier this year on the city in an effort to complete their control over the northern half of Yemen.</p> <p>Maj. Gen. Nasser al-Zubiani, who headed military operations of the government's armed forces, was killed on the front line in the Balaq mountain range, south of the city of Marib, said the two officials, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the media.</p> <p>Al-Zubiani was inspecting government troops and allied tribal fighters trying to stave off the Houthi attack at the time. Government forces had earlier advanced a few kilometers (miles) following fierce battles south of the city, one of the officials said.</p> <p>The rebels stepped up attacks on Marib in recent weeks, sending waves of fighters to try and breach government defenses. Hundreds died in the clashes, mostly rebels, the official added.</p>



	<p>A Saudi-led coalition, which is fighting on the side of the government forces, said it launched at least 35 airstrikes on rebel positions around Marib over the weekend, killing at least 200 Houthis. At least three more airstrikes hit the rebels in Yemen's western coast, it said.</p> <p>The Houthi offensive on Marib came as they suffered blows elsewhere in the country. Last month, government forces took the district of Hays and a major highway linking the contested port city of Hodeida with the rebel-held capital of Sanaa.</p> <p>Yemen's civil war began in 2014 when the Houthis took Sanaa and much of the northern part of the country, forcing President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi's government to flee to the south, then to Saudi Arabia.</p> <p>The Saudi-led coalition, backed at the time by the U.S., entered the war months later to try restoring Hadi to power. Despite a relentless air campaign and ground fighting, the war has deteriorated into a stalemate, killing more than 130,000 people — civilians and fighters — and spawning the world's worst humanitarian crisis.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/13 Tornado toll not as high initially feared</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/tornadoes-business-arkansas-kentucky-mayfield-b6ef6a901cc2e4552e760a36c749937c">https://apnews.com/article/tornadoes-business-arkansas-kentucky-mayfield-b6ef6a901cc2e4552e760a36c749937c</a>
GIST	<p>MAYFIELD, Ky. (AP) — Night-shift workers were in the middle of the holiday rush, cranking out candles at Mayfield Consumer Products, when a tornado closed in on the factory and the word went out to seek shelter.</p> <p>For Autumn Kirks, that meant tossing aside wax and fragrance buckets to make an improvised safe place. She glanced away from her boyfriend, Lannis Ward, and when she looked back, he was gone. Later in the day, she got the terrible news — that Ward had been killed in the storm.</p> <p>At least eight people at the factory were killed, among dozens of fatalities across several Kentucky counties. The state was the worst-hit by far in an unusual mid-December swarm of twisters across the Midwest and the South that leveled entire communities and left at least 14 people dead in Illinois, Tennessee, Arkansas and Missouri.</p> <p>But the factory toll, at least, will be lower than initially feared.</p> <p>Gov. Andy Beshear said Saturday that only 40 of the 110 people working in the factory at the time were rescued, and that “it’ll be a miracle if anybody else is found alive in it.” But on Sunday, the candle company said that while eight were confirmed dead and eight remained missing, more than 90 others had been located.</p> <p>“Many of the employees were gathered in the tornado shelter and after the storm was over they left the plant and went to their homes,” said Bob Ferguson, a spokesman for the company. “With the power out and no landline they were hard to reach initially. We’re hoping to find more of those eight unaccounted as we try their home residences.”</p> <p>Beshear had said Sunday morning that the state’s toll could exceed 100. But after state officials heard the company’s update, he said that afternoon it might be as low as 50.</p> <p>“We are praying that maybe original estimates of those we have lost were wrong. If so, it’s going to be pretty wonderful,” the governor said.</p> <p>Rescuers at the candle factory had to crawl over the dead to get to the living at a disaster scene that smelled like scented candles.</p>

By the time churchgoers gathered Sunday morning to pray for the lost, more than 24 hours had elapsed since anyone had been found alive. Instead, crews recovered pieces of peoples' lives — a backpack, a pair of shoes and a cellphone with 27 missed messages were among the items.

"We're going to grieve together, we're going to dig out and clean up together, and we will rebuild and move forward together. We're going to get through this," Beshear said. "We're going to get through this together, because that is what we do."

Four twisters hit the state in all, including one with an extraordinarily long path of about 200 miles (322 kilometers), authorities said. The outbreak was all the more remarkable because it came at a time of year when cold weather normally limits tornadoes.

Twelve people were reported killed in and around Bowling Green alone.

"I've got towns that are gone, that are just, I mean gone. My dad's hometown — half of it isn't standing," Beshear said of Dawson Springs.

He said that going door to door in search of victims is out of the question in the hardest-hit areas: "There are no doors."

"We're going to have over 1,000 homes that are gone, just gone," the governor said.

With afternoon high temperatures forecast only in the 40s, tens of thousands of people were without power. About 300 National Guard members went house to house, checking on people and helping to remove debris. Cadaver dogs searched for victims.

Kirks said she and her boyfriend were about 10 feet apart in a hallway when someone said to take cover. Suddenly, she saw sky and lightning where a wall had been, and Ward had vanished.

"I remember taking my eyes off of him for a second, and then he was gone," she said.

"It was indescribable," Pastor Joel Cauley said of the disaster scene. "It was almost like you were in a twilight zone. You could smell the aroma of candles, and you could hear the cries of people for help. Candle smells and all the sirens is not something I ever expected to experience at the same time."

The outbreak also killed at least six people in Illinois, where an Amazon distribution center in Edwardsville was hit; four in Tennessee; two in Arkansas, where a nursing home was destroyed and the governor said workers shielded residents with their own bodies; and two in Missouri.

Debris from destroyed buildings and shredded trees covered the ground in Mayfield, a city of about 10,000 in western Kentucky. Twisted sheet metal, downed power lines and wrecked vehicles lined the streets. Windows were blown out and roofs torn off the buildings that were still standing.

In the shadows of their crumpled church sanctuaries, two congregations in Mayfield came together on Sunday to pray for those who were lost. Members of First Christian Church and First Presbyterian Church met in a parking lot surrounded by rubble, piles of broken bricks and metal.

"Our little town will never be the same, but we're resilient," Laura McClendon said. "We'll get there, but it's going to take a long time."

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HEADLINE	12/13 China reluctant to approve mRNA vaccine?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/13/china/china-western-mrna-vaccine-mic-intl-hnk/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/13/china/china-western-mrna-vaccine-mic-intl-hnk/index.html</a>

**Hong Kong (CNN)** When the highly infectious Delta variant hit China in the summer, some public health experts were hopeful that the country could soon receive an immunity boost from BioNTech's highly effective mRNA Covid-19 vaccine.

In July, the shot was [reported](#) to have passed an expert review by Chinese regulators and was in the administration review stage, according to Fosun Pharma, the Chinese partner of BioNTech licensed to produce and distribute the vaccine in the Greater China region. Fosun was even planning to start domestic [trial production](#) by the end of August.

However, five months later there is still no word from Chinese officials on when -- or whether -- the vaccine will ever be approved, even as the newly emerged Omicron variant poses a fresh challenge to China's zero-Covid strategy -- and its less effective domestic vaccines.

Much remains unknown about the fast-spreading Omicron variant, which carries an unusually large amount of mutations that scientists worry could potentially make it more transmissible and less susceptible to existing vaccines.

Preliminary lab studies show two doses of the BioNTech vaccine, which is produced by Pfizer outside of China, may not provide sufficient protection against infection with Omicron, but three doses are able to neutralize it, Pfizer/BioNTech [said in a news release](#) last week. Two doses may still provide protection against severe disease, it added.

China has not released studies on how much its domestic vaccines protect against Omicron, though experts and state media have [voiced confidence](#) in curbing the new variant.

More than 1.1 billion Chinese people -- or nearly 80% of the population -- have been fully inoculated, mostly with inactivated vaccines developed by Sinopharm and Sinovac. But their efficacy was found to be much lower than the mRNA shots, and [studies suggest](#) the immunity provided by the Chinese vaccines wanes rapidly.

According to the World Health Organization, Sinovac's vaccine CoronaVac was just 51% effective at preventing symptomatic disease against the original variant, while Sinopharm was 79%. In comparison, the efficacy of mRNA vaccines developed by Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna were as high as 95%.

And a [Hong Kong study](#) published in The Lancet in June found that health workers fully vaccinated with BioNTech's mRNA shot had about 10 times the amount of antibodies than those who received Sinovac's inactivated vaccine.

The limited protection provided by Chinese vaccines is far from enough to satisfy China's ambitious goal of keeping Covid infection at zero within its borders. Over the past few months, authorities have resorted to increasingly stringent measures to curb local outbreaks -- often at great economic cost and disruption to daily lives.

But infections have continued to flare up. Last week, more than 130 cases were reported in eastern Zhejiang province, home to the country's key manufacturing and export hubs. And several local authorities across China have called for residents not to travel home for the Lunar Chinese New Year to reduce the spread of the virus.

To improve waning public immunity, Chinese authorities have started rolling out booster shots -- but again using the inactivated vaccines.

Some studies have found that mRNA vaccines can generate better immune responses as booster shots. A recent [British study](#), for instance, found that mRNA vaccines made by Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna provide the biggest boost to antibody levels when given 10-12 weeks after the second dose. Two separate studies from Israel published last week, meanwhile, showed booster doses of Pfizer/BioNTech's vaccine reduced [infections tenfold](#) and Covid [deaths by 90%](#).

It's not that Chinese officials are unaware of the advantage of using mRNA vaccines. Last month, Zeng Guang, a former chief epidemiologist at the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, [acknowledged](#) that "real world data showed that using mRNA vaccines or recombinant protein vaccines as a booster dose for inactivated vaccines will achieve better results," citing data from countries such as Turkey, Thailand and Lebanon.

But still, Zeng insisted that using the same technology to deliver booster shots would be safer and more widely accepted by the public.

So why is the Chinese government reluctant to approve Western mRNA vaccines?

Yanzhong Huang, a senior fellow for global health at the Council on Foreign Relations, said politics appears to be the main consideration at play.

China had been [a frontrunner in the global vaccine race](#) for much of last year, developing multiple Covid shots using the old-fashioned approach of employing an inactivated whole virus to prompt the body to develop immunity.

It has also [sent billions of doses abroad](#) -- a campaign that provided vital access to vaccines in developing countries, while also serving to help Beijing promote soft power and project international influence.

"When China developed its own vaccines, they used that to show the technological progress of China. And now if you switch to a foreign-made vaccine, it's tantamount to admitting that you're not as good as other countries in terms of technological capabilities," Huang said.

The Chinese government may also be keen to protect the interests of its domestic vaccine industry, according to Huang. "I'm sure they (existing vaccine makers) would be very resistant to introducing outsiders to this huge market," he said.

While Chinese regulators held off approval for the BioNTech vaccine, domestic companies were given the green light to forge ahead with developing their own mRNA vaccines.

Last month, China's Ministry of Science and Technology [approved trials](#) for a domestically developed mRNA vaccine as a booster shot -- for adults who have been fully inoculated with inactivated vaccines. It has already conducted clinical trials in countries including Mexico and Indonesia, though the results have yet to be announced.

The vaccine, ARCoVax, was jointly developed by Walvax Biotechnology, Suzhou Abogen Biosciences and the Academy of Military Medical Sciences -- a Chinese military research institute. Its production base in southwestern Yunnan province has the capacity to produce 200 million doses annually, according to [state media reports](#), which touted China's success in having "grasped core mRNA vaccine technology."

Several other Chinese companies, including state-owned giant Sinopharm, are also developing mRNA vaccines, Huang said. Beijing will likely want to approve homegrown mRNA vaccines before greenlighting any foreign ones, he added.

But there are signs that Chinese experts are hoping for more cooperation with their Western counterparts. Over the weekend, Zhong Nanshan, a top Chinese respiratory disease expert and government adviser, urged China to increase exchanges and cooperation in vaccine development with other countries.

"We need to learn about the good things in other countries, such as mRNA (vaccines)," Zhong [said at a forum](#) in the southern city of Guangzhou Saturday.

"They've spent years on the research and managed to develop the world's first mRNA (vaccine) in just a few months...We need to learn from their technology in this area," he said.

HEADLINE	12/12 Atmospheric river to inundate California
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/12/weather/california-west-coast-snow-storm-heavy-rain-sunday/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/12/weather/california-west-coast-snow-storm-heavy-rain-sunday/index.html</a>
GIST	<p>(CNN)A drought-denting weather system will hit the West Coast, bringing the biggest snowfall of the season to California. Strong winds and welcome but heavy rain also will affect the West Coast through midweek.</p> <p>The system is moving in from the Gulf of Alaska and will slowly push hazardous conditions southward from the Pacific Northwest Sunday to Southern California by Tuesday.</p> <p>This will be "easily the biggest snowstorm this season," forecasters at the National Weather Service (NWS) office in Sacramento said in their discussion on Sunday morning.</p> <p>It's understandable as to why.</p> <p>Snow totals of 3 to 5 feet are likely for the Sierra Nevada, with isolated areas receiving up to 8 feet. Some areas could see snowfall rates of more than 2 inches an hour.</p> <p>Wind gusts approaching 60 mph will cause near whiteout conditions, making travel nearly impossible.</p> <p>Avalanches are also possible, alongside downed trees and power outages. An avalanche was already triggered near a <a href="#">Seattle-area ski resort</a> from this system Saturday.</p> <p>Outside the Sierras, the Olympic, Cascade and Northern Rocky Mountains are forecast to receive 1 to 3 feet of snow, too.</p> <p><b>Welcome rains</b></p> <p>California continues to experience record low reservoir levels and exceptional drought conditions.</p> <p>All of the state is in at least a <a href="#">moderate drought</a>, with much of the central and southern sections in an extreme to exceptional drought.</p> <p>This is exactly where a long-lived atmospheric river will set up, bringing with it an impressive surge of moisture.</p> <p>This moisture will fall in the form of heavy mountain snow and soaking rains.</p> <p>Coastal and valley regions of California, as well as the Pacific Northwest will see at least 1 to 3 inches of some much-needed rain.</p> <p>Some areas near the foothills in California could see half a foot by Tuesday night.</p> <p>After the <a href="#">second driest Water Year</a> on record in 2021, running from October 1 to September 30, this is a welcome sight.</p> <p>Rain and snowpack are important for <a href="#">replenishing California's water reservoirs</a>, which are low enough to force water emergencies and shut down hydropower plants in the state.</p> <p>Unfortunately, the rainfall will come with a price.</p> <p>As the Los Angeles National Weather Service Office said Sunday morning, the rain will "make a mess of rush hour traffic on Tuesday."</p> <p>Plus, too much precipitation too quickly on dry soils and burn scars raises the concern for flash flooding, as well as the potential for mudslides in the coming days in Central and Southern California.</p>

HEADLINE	<b>12/12 Prague: thousands protest vaccine mandate</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/thousands-protest-prague-covid-vaccine-mandate-81707787">https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/thousands-protest-prague-covid-vaccine-mandate-81707787</a>
GIST	<p>PRAGUE -- Several thousand people marched through the Czech capital on Sunday, protesting a COVID-19 vaccination mandate for certain groups including people age 60 and over.</p> <p>The participants didn't wear face coverings or follow social distancing rules despite a request by police to do so. One person was detained.</p> <p>The protesters, chanting "Freedom!" alleged their constitutional rights are being violated. They said they weren't against voluntary vaccination but opposed a vaccine mandate.</p> <p>The outgoing government released an order this week, making vaccination mandatory for the 60 and over age group, as well as medical personnel, police officers, firefighters and medical students.</p> <p>The order is due to take effect in March, but it might end up being overturned. Prime Minister Andrej Babis' administration will be replaced by a new government formed by five parties that won October's parliamentary election, led by Prime Minister-designate Petr Fiala.</p> <p>The new coalition government is expected to be sworn in next week. The coalition opposed a vaccination mandate for older people and can cancel it. So far, 60.3% of people in the nation of 10.7 million have been fully vaccinated.</p> <p>The country recently faced a record surge in new infections, but the number of new cases has been on the decline for more than a week.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Military vaccine holdouts approach 40,000</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2021/12/11/vaccine-mandate-military/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2021/12/11/vaccine-mandate-military/</a>
GIST	<p>The number of active-duty U.S. military personnel declining to be vaccinated against the coronavirus by their prescribed deadlines is as high as 40,000, with new Army data showing that, days ahead of its cutoff, 3 percent of soldiers either have rejected President Biden's mandate or sought a long-shot exemption.</p> <p>While overall the vast majority of service members are fully vaccinated, military analysts have characterized the number of refusals and holdouts as a troubling indicator in a rigid, top-down culture where decision-making often is predicated on the understanding that the troops will do as they are told. It also suggests the nation's divisive politics have influenced a small but significant segment of the Defense Department, historically an apolitical institution.</p> <p>Military leaders have few options to address the dissent other than to hope that, as waiver requests are denied, more troops will choose to fall in line. The alternative, the Pentagon has said, is to purge the ranks of those failing to meet requirements, though some of those roughly 40,000 service members opting out had already planned to leave the military.</p> <p>"We know there's some more work to do," Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told reporters Friday. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, who four months ago mandated vaccination for every service member, "expects 100 percent" compliance, Kirby said.</p> <p>But the numbers are unlikely to change much before Wednesday, when the Army's deadline arrives and all 1.3 million active-duty personnel are expected either to be fully vaccinated or have an exemption in hand.</p> <p>Posing added concern, officials have said, is the emergence of the virus's omicron variant, which public health experts fear may elude — to an extent that's still unknown — the protection afforded by existing</p>



vaccine regimens. In response, the Biden administration has begun an aggressive campaign urging those eligible [to get booster shots](#), though it's unclear how this may impact federal policies. It's an active discussion among Pentagon leadership, Kirby said, noting that, for now, the Defense Department is encouraging troops to get the extra shot.

"Rest assured," Kirby added, "that should there be an addition to that in terms of the mandatory vaccine requirement, we will clearly communicate that and be transparent about it."

The more than 14,000 Army personnel who remain unvaccinated join another 25,000 approximately in the active-duty Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps who have also challenged the Biden administration's directive, according to a review of each service's official data. An additional 10,700 troops in the Air Force Reserve and Air National Guard remained unvaccinated past their Dec. 2 deadline, pushing the military's overall tally of holdouts closer to 50,000.

Numbering roughly 475,000, the Army is the largest of the military services and set the last deadline by which active-duty troops were required to comply with the mandate. The Air Force, which had the military's [most ambitious deadline of Nov. 2](#), continues to process thousands of appeals from airmen who declined to be vaccinated on medical or religious grounds. The Navy Department, which includes the Marine Corps, has said personnel should expect very few waiver requests to be granted.

Officials have said such exemptions would be exceedingly rare. To date, across the entire military, only a handful of permanent medical waivers have been approved but so far no religious exemptions.

The Navy Department set a Nov. 28 deadline and [vowed to move aggressively in discharging](#) those who decline to follow orders. Like the Air Force, the Navy said service members have five days to start vaccinations if their exemptions are denied. The Army took a softer approach, saying that vaccine refusers would undergo counseling before facing punitive action that would threaten their careers, though continued defiance would risk dismissal.

That tens of thousands of troops are opting out raises questions about the state of military culture, which fundamentally survives on compliance, said Katherine L. Kuzminski, a military policy expert at the Center for a New American Security, a Washington think tank.

"It goes against military values of following through with lawful orders," she said. "It raises questions about the posture of the services in other uncomfortable situations," she added, like large-scale military operations where hesitating to act on orders in some situations can be disastrous.

Active-duty troops account for 1.3 million of the 2.1 million personnel of the Pentagon's total force, which includes military reservists in each of the four service branches and the soldiers and airmen who constitute each state's National Guard. The Air Force Reserve and Air National Guard have had their deadline pass. Navy and Marine reservists — where about 18,000 have not received any dose — face a Dec. 28 deadline.

The Army set the National Guard and Reserve deadline for the end of June, and a combined total of about 170,000 soldiers have not received any shot, their numbers show. Defense officials have said rates in the Guard and Reserve may be higher than what's reflected in official data, as some service members may have gotten vaccinated on their own but haven't yet reported it.

Coronavirus vaccines became available to military personnel starting in late 2020. The Pentagon mandate dates to August, when Austin announced that, as a part of the administration's broader plan for jump-starting stagnant vaccination rates across the country, coronavirus shots would be added to the bloc of compulsory immunizations for all U.S. troops — a list that includes injections to ward off hepatitis A and B, Measles, mumps, rubella and other maladies.

Republicans in Congress, and [at least one GOP governor](#), have questioned the president's authority to direct such a mandate, with many arguing that vaccination should be a personal choice. Some lawmakers warned there would be an exodus of experienced personnel as a result. A similar directive for federal

	contractors to be vaccinated or submit to regular testing also sparked blowback, and in recent days two Senate Democrats — Sen. Joe Manchin III (W.Va.) and Sen. Jon Tester (Mont.) — <a href="#">backed a Republican</a> proposal seeking to undo Biden’s vaccination rules for private employers.
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HEADLINE	<b>12/12 Kentucky grim scale of destruction</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/12/us/tornadoes-damage-deaths.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/12/us/tornadoes-damage-deaths.html</a>
GIST	<p>MAYFIELD, Ky. — Darryl Johnson didn’t know what his sister did at the Mayfield Consumer Products factory or why she worked nights; he knew only that her husband dropped her off on Friday evening and that they never heard from her again.</p> <p>He stood in a gravel lot next to the giant ruin of metal and wood, which just days ago was the candle factory where his sister, Janine Johnson-Williams, had clocked in for her shift. The factory where he works, 45 miles up the road, shut down when the storms were approaching, Mr. Johnson said. He could not find anyone in Mayfield to tell him anything.</p> <p>Late Sunday evening, Mr. Johnson finally got word. His sister was dead.</p> <p>Sunday was a day of wrenching discoveries across the middle of the country, where an outbreak of tornadoes on Friday night, including one that traveled more than 220 catastrophic miles, left a deep scar of devastation. But as work crews dug through ruins and small-town coroners counted the dead on Sunday, there was at least a glimmer of hope that the death toll may not end up being as enormous as initially feared.</p> <p>On Sunday evening, Troy Propes, the chief executive of Mayfield Consumer Products, which runs the candle factory that was demolished by the tornado, and which many dread may account for the largest number of deaths in the storm, said in an interview that only eight people had been confirmed dead at the factory and another six remained missing.</p> <p>Bob Ferguson a company spokesman, said that of the roughly 110 workers who were on the late shift at the factory on Friday night, more than 90 employees had been accounted for.</p> <p>Still, Gov. Andy Beshear told reporters on Sunday that the state had not confirmed those figures and said that search operations were still underway at the site.</p> <p>“There have been, I think, multiple bodies,” Mr. Beshear said. “The wreckage is extensive.”</p> <p>The death toll from the tornado swarm includes people who had been killed in Arkansas, Illinois, Missouri and Tennessee, but the greatest loss of life was unquestionably in Kentucky, where Mr. Beshear said that at least four counties had tolls in the double digits. A dozen people were killed in Warren County, several of them children; in Muhlenberg County, there were 11 victims, all in the tiny town of Bremen. One was 4 months old.</p> <p>“We’re still finding bodies,” Mr. Beshear said. “I mean, we’ve got cadaver dogs in towns that they shouldn’t have to be in.”</p> <p>In Edwardsville, Ill., officials released the names of six people who were killed while working at an Amazon delivery depot that was hit by a tornado. “At this time, there are no additional reports of people missing,” the Edwardsville Police Department said in a statement on Sunday.</p> <p>More than 50,000 customers were still without power in Kentucky on Sunday afternoon, and more than 150,000 were without power in Michigan, which was also affected by the sprawling storm. Mr. Beshear said that there were “thousands of people without homes” in Kentucky, though the sheer amount of devastation made precise figures, at this point, impossible to come by.</p>

“I don’t think we’ll have seen damage at this scale, ever,” he said.

But even as the accounting of the storm was slowly being made, much was still dreadfully unknown.

In the town of Dawson Springs, where Mr. Beshear’s father was born and where his grandfather owned a funeral home, the list of the missing was eight pages long, single-spaced, the governor said in an interview on CNN.

On Sunday, slabs lay bare on the ground where houses once stood along the streets of Dawson Springs. Mattresses hung in trees and were strewn about the housing lots. Teams hunting for victims and survivors left spray-painted symbols on walls that remained standing.

Families bearing bruises and scrapes from Friday night walked among the wreckage, looking through the rubble for medicine, insurance information and food stamps.

Lacy Duke and her family were searching for two missing cats. In between calling out names, they described 22 seconds of deafening horror on Friday night as they huddled in a storm cellar, and an aftermath that was almost apocalyptic. Their house had folded like an accordion. A mobile home had disappeared. A teenage boy had injured his arm so badly it had to be amputated. The boy’s grandmother had been stuck under a car.

“This year’s been rough,” Ms. Duke said. She had been in a car accident, her son had been sick with Covid-19 and, at the auto part supplier where she had worked, everyone in her department had been laid off. “And then this happened.”

The storm system’s devastation exposed all along its path a late-night world of warehouses and factories on the outskirts of towns and cities, where people worked handling the seasonal traffic of packages or making scented candles for \$8 to \$12 an hour. A current of anger ran through the communities that were hit badly in the storm, as people demanded to know why so many were still on the job after alarms had sounded about the approaching danger.

At a Sunday morning church service in Granite City, Ill., when the pastor asked for prayers for the loved ones of the six who died in the Amazon warehouse, Paul Reagan, a retired steelworker, raised his hand.

“There is no reason for us to lose family members,” Mr. Reagan said, “because corporate America wants a dollar.”

In Kentucky, [frustration was growing](#) about what transpired at the candle factory, which, in the initial estimates of the toll, accounted for a majority of the estimated deaths statewide.

Though officials said that many if not most workers at the factory had been sheltering in a designated place in the building when the tornado hit, some people asked why the factory stayed open well after warnings were raised about the severity of the storms.

The Mayfield Consumer Products factory was one of the largest employers in the county, though employment waxed and waned with layoffs in some years and labor shortages in others.

The factory was recently advertising 10- and 12-hour shifts, starting at \$8 an hour, with mandatory overtime “required frequently.” Several inmates from the Graves County jail were working there on Friday night as part of an inmate-to-work program. All survived the storm, according to the jail; a deputy from the jail did not.

Asked why the factory had not shut down on Friday night, Mr. Propes said that the company had made the best decisions under the circumstances, insisting that having employees hunker down inside the factory was safer than sending them home on the roads.

“Looking through the lens of hindsight, I think, is not the right lens,” he said. “The lens to look through is to say with the same facts, would you make the same decisions? And I think that answer is yes because our team did exactly what they were supposed to do.”

Isaiah Holt, 32, was on his shift in the wax and fragrance department when he heard the tornado sirens. On Sunday, he was in a hospital bed in Nashville, aching from a bruised lung and broken ribs and worrying about his brother, who also worked at the factory and who was showered with bricks when the building collapsed. Mr. Holt had liked his job, he said. But he questioned whether the factory should have stayed open after tornado warnings were issued. “They should have just canceled,” he said.

In Mayfield, Angel Romero, 38, watched his wife cook chicken soup and heat up tortillas on a stove she had made out of throwaway bricks. Mr. Romero, a father of two children, 8 and 5, looked around his devastated block, now barely recognizable.

“When it came, it devoured everything in its path,” he said. He looked toward his children. “They are still trying to process what happened.”

The Latino population in Mayfield has grown quickly over the past decade, with immigrants from Mexico and Guatemala and newcomers from Puerto Rico arriving to work in chicken factories and at las Velas — the Candles — the nickname for the factory where many possibly died.

“The Latino community was hit hard by this tragedy,” said Ana Massò, the wife of the pastor of the Primera Iglesia Bautista Hispana, where she was collecting donated items to help the people in the community who had been left homeless, lost loved ones or both.

“Many don’t know where to go or who to ask for help,” she said. “I really don’t know where do we go from here.”

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HEADLINE	12/12 Amazon site hit at peak delivery season
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/12/technology/amazon-tornado-edwardsville.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/12/technology/amazon-tornado-edwardsville.html</a>
GIST	<p><a href="#">Nearly every day as Christmas nears</a>, Amazon’s share of online sales typically rises, as customers turn to the e-commerce giant to quickly deliver packages. To make that happen, Amazon hires hundreds of thousands of additional workers, both full-time employees and contractors, and runs its operations at full tilt.</p> <p>One of them, Alonzo Harris, drove his cargo van into Amazon’s delivery depot in Edwardsville, Ill., after 8 p.m. on Friday after a full day delivering packages north of St. Louis. Suddenly, an alarm blared on his work phone. Someone yelled that this was not a drill. Mr. Harris, 44, ran into a shelter on Amazon’s site and heard a loud roar.</p> <p>“I felt like the floor was coming off the ground,” he said. “I felt the wind blowing and saw debris flying everywhere, and people started screaming and hollering and the lights went out.”</p> <p>One of the <a href="#">tornadoes that roared through Kentucky, Arkansas, Illinois</a> and other states on Friday had plowed straight into Amazon’s delivery station in Edwardsville. The toll was grim: <a href="#">Six people died</a>, with 45 making it out alive, according to the Illinois governor, J.B. Pritzker.</p> <p>On Sunday, the authorities said that there were no additional reports of missing people but that search efforts were continuing. It was initially unclear how many people had been at Amazon’s site and what safety measures could have been taken to minimize the loss of life. The tornado was ferocious, ripping off the building’s roof. Two of the structure’s 40-foot-high concrete walls collapsed.</p>

The tornado coincided with a peak in the company's work force. Americans' reliance on Amazon soon turned the deaths at the delivery depot into a focus of the public as the tornadoes' toll became clear over the weekend.

At a church service on Sunday at Thrive Church in Granite City, Ill., about 15 miles from the destroyed Amazon site, clergy and congregants tried to make sense of the disaster and the company's response.

"It's not lost on me, Lord, that this was an Amazon warehouse, and I, like so many other people in this country, get irritated if I can't get my Christmas gifts in three days from Amazon," Sharon Autenrieth, the pastor, said during the service.

That logistical peak also complicated the rescue effort in Edwardsville. The more than 250,000 drivers like Mr. Harris who fuel Amazon's delivery network do not work directly for the company but instead are employed by over 3,000 contractor companies. On Saturday, Mike Fillback, the police chief in Edwardsville, said the authorities had "challenges" in knowing "how many people we actually had at that facility at the time because it's not a set staff."

Only seven people at Amazon's site were full-time employees, said a Madison County commissioner who declined to give his name. He said most were delivery drivers in their 20s who work as contractors.

The delivery center sits in a flat industrial expanse with low-slung warehouses, parked semi-trucks and muddy fields a few miles east of St. Louis and the Mississippi River. An Amazon fulfillment center almost directly across the street from the delivery station was largely untouched. On the front windows there, next to images of snowflakes and Christmas trees, were the words "Peak 2021" and "Our Time To Shine."

On Sunday, Kelly Nantel, an Amazon spokeswoman, said about 190 people worked at the delivery station across all of its shifts but declined to comment on how many were full-time workers. She said the tornado formed in the parking lot, hit and then dissipated.

The tornado struck at the end of a shift, as drivers returned their vans, unloaded items and headed home. Contract drivers are not required to clock into the building, Ms. Nantel said.

Workers there sheltered in two places, she said, and one of those areas was directly struck. These areas are typically fortified, though it was unclear if they were built to withstand a direct tornado strike. Based on preliminary interviews, Ms. Nantel added, the company calculated that about 11 minutes lapsed between the first warning of a tornado and when it hit the delivery station.

The six victims ranged in age from 26 to 62 years old, the Edwardsville police department said on Sunday.

Amazon's model of using contractors is part of a huge push that the company [started in 2018](#) to expand its own deliveries, rather than rely solely on shipping companies like UPS. The company built a network of delivery stations, like the one Edwardsville, which are typically cavernous, single-story buildings.

Unlike Amazon's massive, multistory fulfillment centers where it stores inventory and packs items into individual packages, the delivery stations employ fewer people. Amazon employees sort packages for each delivery route in one area. Then, drivers working for contractors bring vans into another area, where the packages are rolled over in carts, loaded into the vans and driven out.

Amazon had about 70 delivery stations in the United States in 2017 and [now has almost 600](#), with more planned, according to the industry consultant MWPVL International. Globally, the company delivers more than half of its own packages, and as much as three-quarters of its packages in the United States.

Most drivers work for other companies under a program called Delivery Service Partners. Amazon has said the contracting arrangement helps support small businesses that can hire in their communities. But industry consultants and Amazon employees directly involved in the program have said it lets the

company [avoid liability for accidents](#) and other risks, and limits labor organizing in a heavily unionized industry.

Sucharita Kodali, an analyst at Forrester Research, said that while the holiday season is critical for all retailers, it is particularly intense for Amazon. “They promise these delivery dates, so they are likely to experience the most last-minute purchases,” she said.

The Edwardsville delivery station, which Amazon calls DLI4, opened last year and had room for 60 vans at once, according to planning documents.

On Friday, a tornado warning was in effect for Edwardsville as of 8:06 p.m., [according to the National Weather Service](#). At 8:27 p.m., the county emergency management agency reported a partial roof collapse at Amazon’s delivery depot and that people were trapped inside.

Aerial footage of the wreckage showed dozens of vans, many of which had Amazon’s logo, underneath the rubble. Some of the vans were U-Hauls, which the contractors sometimes rent to serve demand during busy periods.

Carla Cope and her husband, said their son, Clayton Cope, 29, was a maintenance mechanic contracting for Amazon. They spoke to him by phone on Friday night when he was at work, they said, and he assured them that he and other workers were on their way to the tornado shelter on site.

About 10 minutes later, the tornado struck. The Copes tried numerous times to reach their son again by phone. They eventually drove to the warehouse from their home in Brighton, Ill., a half-hour away.

“When we pulled up to the building it was pretty devastating,” Ms. Cope said. “There were trucks and rescue vehicles everywhere, a lot of chaos.”

When her husband saw the damage, he immediately feared the worst, Ms. Cope said. Mr. Cope works the same job as a maintenance mechanic that their son did, splitting the night shifts except on Wednesdays when the two work together. He knew that their son was likely to have been in the part of the building that collapsed, she said.

The couple waited at the building until 4:30 a.m., when officials informed them that they had recovered their son’s body.

“There’s just really no words to describe it when they tell you your son’s dead,” said Ms. Cope, her voice cracking. “It’s surreal, unbelievable, devastating.”

Mr. Harris, the delivery driver who survived the storm, said that after the tornado passed, he saw a green tornado shelter sign still hanging above Amazon’s shelter.

“I doubt anything man-made can withstand Mother Nature’s force,” he said. “I think it was an act of God that our shelter remained secure.”

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HEADLINE	12/12 To help victims of the tornadoes
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/12/us/how-to-help-victims-of-the-tornadoes.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/12/us/how-to-help-victims-of-the-tornadoes.html</a>
GIST	<p>The recovery efforts are just beginning for those in the path of the devastating tornadoes that tore through six states on Friday night. Local and national volunteers and aid groups are prepared to rescue and feed and give shelter to those who have been affected by the storms, which killed at least 90 people.</p> <p>The tornado outbreak created almost unfathomable levels of destruction across Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri and Tennessee, the authorities said. From a flattened candle factory in</p>



Kentucky to a ravaged Amazon warehouse in Illinois, the storms showed no mercy for those who were in its path. Kentucky in particular was hit hard by the storms.

Here are some ways you can help relief efforts.

**Before you give, do your research.**

Before you make a donation, especially to a lesser-known organization, you should [do some research](#) to make sure it is reputable. Sites like [Charity Navigator](#) and [Guidestar](#) grade nonprofits based on transparency and effectiveness. The Internal Revenue Service also allows you to search its database to find out whether an organization is eligible to receive tax-deductible contributions. And if you suspect an organization or individual of committing fraud, you can report it to the [National Center for Disaster Fraud](#), part of the Justice Department.

**Here are some local groups that are pitching in.**

**Blood Assurance**, which collects blood donations across its locations in the South, is asking people to [make appointments](#) because of a “critical need” for supply in Tennessee and Kentucky.

For people in the area of Bowling Green, Ky., the **Bowling Green Fire Department** is seeking volunteers to help with recovery efforts. Send the department a [Facebook message](#) with your name, contact information and the type of assistance you can provide.

**Kentucky Baptist Convention**, an organization of Baptist groups, is [raising funds](#) to help its [teams](#) on the ground in affected areas of the state.

**Kentucky Branded**, a clothing store in Lexington, is donating all of the proceeds from the sales of its [“Pray for Kentucky” T-shirt](#) to communities affected by the tornadoes. The shirt costs \$20.

The **Kentucky State Police** in Mayfield are asking [interested volunteers](#) to call 270-331-1979.

**Taylor County Bank** in Campbellsville, Ky., is [accepting donations by mail](#) to its fund for tornado victims. Its mailing address is P.O. Box 200 Campbellsville, Ky., 42719.

The **Team Western Kentucky Tornado Relief Fund**, created by Gov. Andy Beshear, is [collecting donations](#) for victims in the western portion of the state.

**Some national organizations are helping out.**

**AmeriCares**, a health-focused relief and development organization, has sent an emergency response team to Kentucky and has offered assistance to health care facilities in several states. The organization is [accepting donations](#) to help fund these efforts.

**CARE**, an organization that works with impoverished communities, is [collecting money](#) to provide food, cash and clean water to the tornado victims.

**Convoy of Hope**, an organization that feeds the hungry, is [asking for donations](#) to help the survivors across the affected states.

A **Feeding America** location in Kentucky is [raising funds](#) to help provide people with [“ready-to-eat bags of food.”](#)

**Global Empowerment Mission**, a disaster-relief organization, has partnered with local groups and is [raising money](#) to help its team on the ground in Kentucky.

**GoFundMe** has created [a centralized hub](#) with verified fund-raisers to help those affected by the tornadoes. It will be updated with new fund-raisers as they are verified.

**International Medical Corps**, an organization that provides emergency medical services, is [raising funds](#) to give people shelter and essential items.

The **Red Cross** has opened shelters and is asking people to [make appointments to give blood](#). Both its national arm and its [local chapter in Western Kentucky](#) are collecting donations.

**The Salvation Army** is [soliciting donations](#) to help tornado victims in Arkansas, Kentucky and Tennessee.

**Team Rubicon**, a disaster-relief organization, is [raising money](#) to help its team of military veterans and volunteers clear roads in Western Kentucky.

**The United Way of Kentucky** is [asking for donations](#) to provide support services for families in the state who were affected by the tornadoes.

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HEADLINE	12/12 Boosters more effective than first 2 jabs?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/12/what-makes-boosters-more-effective-than-the-first-two-covid-jabs">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/12/what-makes-boosters-more-effective-than-the-first-two-covid-jabs</a>
GIST	<p>Covid-19, we should know by now, is a moving target. In autumn the rollout of boosters to older age groups was contentious. Now they're the single biggest focus. So why do boosters help so significantly compared with first and second jabs, and are we on a conveyor belt towards needing an ever-increasing number of top-ups?</p> <p>Even before Omicron, it was clear boosters would be required to maintain the levels of protection against infection, although protection against severe illness appeared to be holding up well.</p> <p>Vaccines prompt the body to make neutralising antibodies that intercept Covid before the virus infects our cells, but circulating antibodies can wane over time. Data from Israel, one of the first countries to vaccinate its population, showed a drop-off in protection against infection after only three months. It revealed that were people about 15 times more likely to be infected six months after their second dose compared with a few weeks after it.</p> <p>Even if most people remain protected against serious illness, this waning immunity presents a significant public health issue when a proportion of adults remain unvaccinated or have immune conditions that leave them vulnerable.</p> <p>Omicron has made the need for boosters more urgent. Mutations in the virus mean its spike protein now looks quite different from that of the original Wuhan strain that all current vaccines were designed to target. That in turn means antibodies from previous infection and vaccination will be less efficient at intercepting Omicron. Because they stick to the virus less vigorously, a higher quantity of antibodies is also required to compensate for them being less well matched.</p> <p>Studies show that a booster dose increases the levels of antibodies significantly above the level seen after two doses, which some hope means waning immunity will occur more slowly after a third dose, though insufficient time has passed to determine if this is the case.</p> <p>Early studies also suggest that the quality of antibodies is higher following a booster. The immune system continues to refine exactly which antibodies are selected and amplified based on subsequent encounters with the virus or vaccine, and studies suggest there is a broader, more potent immune response following a third dose.</p> <p>There is also reason for some optimism that vaccines may hold up better against severe disease than against infection. The immune system has a second line of defence in T cells, which attack cells already</p>

infected. These tend to stick around longer and they recognise parts of the virus that are more highly conserved, meaning Omicron's mutations are less likely to throw them off the scent. So if antibodies are not good enough to stave off infection, T-cells can swoop in to bring the disease under control before it makes a person seriously unwell.

Laboratory data looks encouraging, but real-world outcomes are being followed closely in South Africa, the UK and elsewhere to answer this question, which remains one of the biggest uncertainties about how this wave will play out.

For now, vaccine makers are working on variant jabs that could be ready to deploy as soon as March, but tweaking current vaccines will leave the same vulnerabilities should Omicron in the future be overshadowed by another even more fast-spreading variant.

The next generation of vaccines, scientists hope, will not only be a good match to circulating strains but provide far broader immune protection so that they are effective against mutations. One possibility is a vaccine specifically designed to trigger a T-cell response to the viral replication machinery as opposed to the spike protein, which scientists have suggested could result in immunity lasting years rather than months.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/12 Tigray rebels retake Ethiopia heritage town</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/12/tigray-rebels-retake-ethiopian-heritage-town-of-lalibela">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/12/tigray-rebels-retake-ethiopian-heritage-town-of-lalibela</a>
GIST	<p>Tigray rebels have recaptured the north Ethiopian town of Lalibela, home to a Unesco world heritage site, 11 days after Ethiopian forces said they had retaken control, local residents have said.</p> <p>It marks another twist in the 13-month-old conflict that has killed thousands of people and triggered a humanitarian crisis in the north of Africa's second most populous nation.</p> <p>Lalibela, 400 miles north of Addis Ababa, is home to 11 medieval monolithic cave churches hewn into the red rock and is a key pilgrimage site for Ethiopian Christians.</p> <p>Tigrayan fighters "are in the town centre, there's no fighting," one resident said on Sunday afternoon.</p> <p>A second resident said: "Yes they came back. They are already here," adding that they appeared to have come from the east, in the direction of Woldiya.</p> <p>They said: "The population, most of the people are scared. Some are running away. Most of the people, they already left because there might be a revenge. We expressed our happiness before when the junta left."</p> <p>Communications have been cut in the conflict zone and access for journalists is restricted, making it difficult to verify the claims.</p> <p>The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) rebel group's military leadership said in a statement shared with pro-TPLF media they had launched "comprehensive counter-offensives" in numerous locations including along the road linking Gashena and Lalibela.</p> <p>"Our forces first defended and then carried out counter-offensives against the huge force that was attacking on the Gashena front and surrounding areas and managed to achieve [a] glorious and astonishing victory," it said.</p> <p>The government did not immediately respond to requests for comment.</p>

	<p>In a tweet late on Saturday, the office of the prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, said he had “headed to the front again” and forces under his leadership had captured several strategic locations in Afar and Amhara, including the towns of Arjo, Fokisa and Boren.</p> <p>The war broke out in November 2020 when Abiy sent troops into Ethiopia’s northernmost region of Tigray to topple the TPLF after months of seething tensions with the group that had dominated politics for three decades before he took office.</p> <p>He said the move was in response to attacks on army camps by the TPLF, and vowed a swift victory. But the rebels mounted a shock comeback, recapturing most of Tigray by June before advancing into the neighbouring regions of Amhara and Afar.</p> <p>Fears of a rebel march on Addis Ababa prompted countries including the US, France and Britain to urge their citizens to leave Ethiopia as soon as possible, although Abiy’s government said the city was secure.</p> <p>The fighting has displaced more than 2 million people and driven hundreds of thousands into famine-like conditions, according to UN estimates, and there have been reports of massacres and mass rapes by both sides.</p> <p>Intense diplomatic efforts led by the African Union to try to reach a ceasefire have failed to achieve any visible breakthrough.</p> <p>The UN says the conflict has plunged 9.4 million people “into a critical situation of food assistance” in the regions of Tigray, Afar and Amhara.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/12 In France criticism on US-inspired activism</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-france-criticism-grows-over-u-s-inspired-activism-on-race-gender-11639319941?mod=hp_lead_pos11">https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-france-criticism-grows-over-u-s-inspired-activism-on-race-gender-11639319941?mod=hp_lead_pos11</a>
GIST	<p>PARIS—Prominent French politicians and intellectuals say that the country faces a growing threat: U.S.-style activist movements that are foisting American multiculturalism and gender politics onto France.</p> <p>In recent months, President Emmanuel Macron, government ministers and other high-profile figures have said that activism on a range of issues—from gender-neutral language to condemnation of French historical figures for racism and sexism—is threatening to cleave the republic along the lines of race, religion, gender and sexual orientation.</p> <p>That, they say, contradicts France’s republican ideals, which call for citizens to subordinate such group identities to the country’s universalist values of “liberty, equality and fraternity.”</p> <p>To characterize the purported threat, some have adopted the English term “woke.” Coined in the U.S. to describe a heightened awareness of racism and other prejudice, it has become shorthand for a worldview that puts identity politics front and center in addressing injustice and inequality.</p> <p>As such, the term has been used as an epithet in the U.S., and now in France, by those who challenge that view as dogmatic.</p> <p>“We have to look at what’s weakening democracy, weakening the republic,” said Jean-Michel Blanquer, the French education minister. “Woke-isme is clearly that.”</p> <p>Controversy erupted last month after Le Robert, a dictionary publisher, included an entry for “iel”—a gender-neutral pronoun that fuses “il” and “elle,” the French words for “he” and “she.” The pronoun is intended to counteract a default for the masculine gender in French and to accommodate those who</p>

don't want to specify a gender. The decision came amid a fierce debate over whether such writing should be permitted in official documents.

"I see the first step, or the stigma, of woke-isme," said François Jolivet, a lawmaker from Mr. Macron's party. "When we look at what's happening in the United States, we can't think that new freedoms have come with the arrival of inclusive writing."

French minority groups, activists and some left-leaning politicians and intellectuals call such criticism an attempt to discredit the fight against prejudices that remain widespread in French society. Many of them reject the "woke" label or are unsure what it means, as are most French people, according to polls.

"For me, it is a term used to stigmatize people who fight for equal rights," said Delphine Ravisé-Girard, president of France's National Transgender Association. "Our fight is not woke-isme. It is humanism."

The debate reflects the impact that U.S. protest movements over race and gender have had in France, drawing criticism from some politicians and intellectuals. The #MeToo movement sparked public soul-searching over whether French sexual mores were too permissive of unwanted advances from men. In response, Mr. Macron's government advanced a new law through the legislature that criminalized cat calls and other forms of public sexual comments.

The Black Lives Matter protests after the murder of George Floyd led to [large demonstrations in Paris in 2020](#) against police violence and discrimination. Mr. Macron and his aides [felt that the protesters were inaccurately drawing parallels](#) between America's history of slavery and state-sanctioned racism and what they saw as France's less calamitous racial history, a former aide to Mr. Macron said.

Earlier this year, it emerged that UNEF, France's largest student union, was holding meetings that weren't open to white students, where minorities were invited to discuss their experiences with discrimination. That prompted an outcry from Mr. Macron's government.

UNEF President Melanie Luce said the meetings, which began in 2016 and continue, are intended to put French minorities at ease when discussing the discrimination they have faced.

"If we ask people who are living with discrimination to speak freely in front of everyone, it doesn't work," Ms. Luce said. "At UNEF, we are clear that white racism, or reverse racism, cannot be equated to racism suffered by Jewish people, Muslims, Arab people, Black people."

During the 2020 protests, some activists called for France to remove the names of people linked to the slave trade from statues and public buildings. They targeted Jean-Baptiste Colbert, who in the 17th century helped draft the Black Code, which detailed brutal punishments that could be inflicted on people enslaved in French colonies. A statue of Colbert stands in front of France's National Assembly. French leaders rejected the idea.

"We must do historical and memorial work that does not consist in erasing what we are but in completing our history, with new statues, new street names," Mr. Macron said.

Mr. Blanquer in October launched a think tank, called the Laboratory of the Republic, that aims to counter what he says are a range of threats to France's republican values, according to managing director Eric Clairefond. Those concerns include Islamist political movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood that are active in Europe, as well as social-justice campaigns emanating from the U.S. Such movements, he said, aim to encourage French people to identify as members of a racial or religious group rather than as citizens of France.

Mr. Clairefond said the think tank first plans to analyze how ideas that arose from the U.S. to fight discrimination have influenced France.

“This doesn’t for one minute call into question the necessary battle against discrimination and inequality,” he said. “We’re mobilizing against the excesses, the deviations from a legitimate fight.”

Some French commentators say an examination of racism in France is long overdue. French authorities are largely forbidden by law from gathering statistics on race, ethnicity or religion, a policy intended to treat all citizens equally. But academics, activists and people of color say this leaves the government blind to widespread, de facto discrimination against France’s Black and Muslim communities.

French authorities have begun to explore the problem. A study backed by the French labor ministry and published last month found that job candidates with North African last names were 31% less likely than those with white French surnames and equivalent credentials to get called back.

“Hiring discrimination based on presumed origins remains elevated and a major element of the labor market in France,” the ministry said.

Elisabeth Moreno, Mr. Macron’s minister for gender equality and equal opportunity, echoed the sentiment of many French minorities when she said on French television, “Obviously there is white privilege.”

She took her remarks back several weeks later, following criticism from within her party, La République en Marche, which Mr. Macron founded. Mr. Jolivet and others said such public discussion of racial hierarchies was harmful. “I regret having used the phrase. It comes from the United States,” she said.

France’s debate over inclusive writing has been brewing for years. Le Robert decided to include “iel” after observing that its use, while still relatively rare, was growing quickly in recent months based on statistical analyses of a large body of texts. “It seemed useful to us to specify its meaning for those who come across it, and would like to use it or on the contrary reject it,” the publisher said.

Mr. Jolivet, the French lawmaker, and other critics of the decision have asked for input on “iel” from the Académie Française, which in France is considered the official arbiter of the French language. The academy, whose 40 members are called the Immortals and receive lifetime appointments, plans to make an announcement soon, a spokeswoman said, after conducting “some lexicographic and grammatical research.”

But the academy has previously taken a dim view of inclusive writing, arguing that it would undermine the fight for gender equality. Among other changes, inclusive writing allows the masculine and feminine versions of French words to be stuck together with a dot, for example, “Français·es” to refer to a group of French men and women. Traditional usage calls for the masculine form “Français.”

“By advocating an immediate and comprehensive reform of the spelling,” the academy said in May, “the promoters of inclusive writing violate the rhythms of language development according to a brutal, arbitrary and uncoordinated injunction.”

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HEADLINE	12/12 Iran steps up deportations of Afghans
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-steps-up-deportations-of-afghans-trying-to-flee-taliban-and-poverty-11639324804?mod=lead_feature_below_a_pos1">https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-steps-up-deportations-of-afghans-trying-to-flee-taliban-and-poverty-11639324804?mod=lead_feature_below_a_pos1</a>
GIST	ZARANJ, Afghanistan—To escape the Taliban, Mohammad Taher, a soldier in the army of the ousted U.S.-backed Afghan government, fled first through the desert to Pakistan, then dodged gunfire to cross the border into Iran. There, a truck he was riding in—cramped together with other Afghan migrants—slid off a winding road and flipped, leaving him with serious injuries.



After he was discharged from an Iranian hospital, where doctors told him he had fractured two vertebrae, police deported him. It was his second failed attempt to get into Iran. Now he is in this provincial capital in southwestern Afghanistan, struggling to get around in a back-and-neck brace that extends up to his chin.

Mr. Taher, 21 years old, said he is giving up on trying to flee. "I'm going home," he said.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Iran and Pakistan opened their doors to millions of Afghan refugees fleeing Soviet occupation and then civil war and the first Taliban regime. That isn't the case now. Since Kabul fell to the Taliban on Aug. 15, Pakistan has sealed its borders nearly shut to refugees. Iran has deported hundreds of thousands of Afghans in recent months, unwilling to consider asylum applications.

"People are simply being dumped on the border" by Iranian authorities, a United Nations official said. "The percentage of deportations is rising dramatically since the takeover by the Taliban," the official said.

Between 2,500 and 4,000 Afghans are being deported every day by Iranian authorities and ending up in Zaranj. That is compounding an already-tense situation at the Afghan-Iranian border. Earlier this month Iranian and Taliban forces exchanged fire with mortars and machine guns after a dispute between Iranian farmers and Taliban fighters over border demarcation.

Migrants without passports or Iranian visas usually enter Iran via desert smuggling routes in the province of Nimroz, where the borders of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan meet. Returnees on the way back cross the Silk Bridge linking Afghanistan and Iran as they walk alongside fuel trucks and baggage handlers pushing rickety trolleys and wearing scarves and swimming goggles to protect against windblown sand.

From August, when the Taliban swept through Afghanistan in their final blitz offensive, through Dec. 5, nearly half a million Afghans who entered Iran illegally later returned, according to the U.N.'s International Organization for Migration. About 360,000 were deported and 126,000 left voluntarily. U.N. officials said many of those likely returned because they feared deportation.

"I was forced to leave," said one of them, a 23-year-old migrant named Hashim, minutes after arriving in Zaranj from Iran. Like some Afghans he uses a single name. After traveling for seven days to reach the Iranian city of Shiraz, where he ended up in a safe house with 200 to 300 other Afghans, Hashim was caught and sent to the border, he said. Iranian police confiscated his phone and the \$17 he said he had left after paying smugglers to get him across the border.

"I may have to start begging to collect the amount I need to travel home," to the province of Zabul, about 350 miles away, Hashim said.

Afghans are increasingly desperate to flee—and not just because they fear the Taliban. The U.S. has responded to the Taliban takeover with economic sanctions that paralyzed the financial system. International donors halted most aid. The Taliban have contributed to the economic meltdown by banning most women from work and education. The worst drought in four decades has made things even grimmer. All in all, the country's economy shrank by 40% since August, the U.N. has estimated.

In total, nearly 1.2 million Afghans have returned home from Iran this year, the highest number on record, according to the International Organization for Migration.

Saraj Gholami, 67, crossed the desert into Iran in a truck with a smuggler and dozens of other migrants in late November. When Iranian police chased them near the city of Kerman, the truck skidded off a mountain road and crashed. Mr. Gholami said he broke his back in the fall.

"I only went so I could buy rice, oil and other things for my wife," said Mr. Gholami, immobile on a stretcher at an International Organization for Migration center in Zaranj. He described how Iranian police drove him to the border in a bus for hours and then deported him. "There was no ambulance," he said. "They told me to sit on the seat, but I was screaming in pain. Then they asked me to stand."

Mr. Gholami, a laborer, had yet to break the news of his accident to his wife and only daughter in his home province of Ghor, about 280 miles away.

Iran's reluctance to host Afghan refugees is rooted in a deep economic crisis of its own. In the face of highly restrictive U.S. sanctions, newly elected Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi has pledged to create more jobs, boost domestic production and restrict migration.

"Now that Iran's economy has been severely damaged by the pandemic, as well as unilateral coercive sanctions, and in recent months has hosted more than 300,000 new Afghan refugees, we are no longer able to host the displaced population," Iran's deputy permanent representative to the U.N., Zahra Ershadi, said in October.

Iran is also seeking to send a message to Afghans that it won't allow a repeat of the refugee crisis in 2015-16, when hundreds of thousands of Afghans traveled through Iran to Turkey on their way to Europe, said Fatemeh Aman, a senior fellow with the Washington-based Middle East Institute.

"They are concerned that Iran will become a hub for refugees the way Turkey is," she said.

Iran and Pakistan house about 90% of the 2.6 million Afghans registered as refugees world-wide—the second-largest refugee population after Syrians, according to the U.N.'s refugee agency.

Even before the Taliban takeover, many European countries temporarily suspended deportations of Afghans, citing the quickly changing security situation in Afghanistan and an inability to ensure the safety of returnees. European states host a fraction of the world's displaced Afghans.

Iran is home to an Afghan population of more than three million, mostly migrant workers and refugees. Many of them are undocumented, meaning they have fewer protections and are at risk of being detained and expelled. Iranian security forces routinely raid factories and businesses, rounding up those without legal papers.

Saeed Abdollah Ahmadi, a 27-year-old radiography technician from Kabul, left Afghanistan days after the Taliban takeover. His destination was Turkey, and he paid human traffickers with his deceased mother's savings to try to get there. He said the trip cost him a total of \$1,200.

Once in Iran, Mr. Ahmadi and dozens of other travelers were handed over to a teenage guide to take them through the mountains of western Iran to the Turkish border, he said. Crossing barbed wire and deep ditches, and hiding in valleys, they were caught by Turkish border guards who he said beat them with metal pipes, shouting, "No Turkey, yes Afghanistan."

Now back in Tehran, Mr. Ahmadi has found lodging with an Afghan family. He is now looking for work while plotting his next move. "For now, I need to rest," he said.

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HEADLINE	12/13 Australia military overhaul w/SKorea deal
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/australia-steps-up-military-overhaul-with-korea-arms-deal-11639375800?mod=lead_feature_below_a_pos1">https://www.wsj.com/articles/australia-steps-up-military-overhaul-with-korea-arms-deal-11639375800?mod=lead_feature_below_a_pos1</a>
GIST	<p>SYDNEY—Australia signed a contract worth about \$717 million to buy self-propelled howitzers from South Korea, broadening its military cooperation as it seeks to counter China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region.</p> <p>The contract, while relatively small, marks the latest step in Australia's efforts to <a href="#">overhaul its military</a> to create a larger, more powerful force that also includes acquiring nuclear-powered submarines using U.S. technology and building its own guided missiles. Last year, the government said it would spend roughly \$186 billion over 10 years on high-tech defense programs including long-range missiles, offensive cyber capabilities and radar surveillance.</p>

Australia awarded the contract for 30 self-propelled howitzers, 15 armored ammunition-resupply vehicles and weapon-locating radars to the local unit of South Korean weapons maker [Hanwha](#) Corp. In doing so, Australia is stepping beyond two security pacts involving the U.S.—AUKUS and the Quad—that underpin its efforts to counterbalance China’s military power in the Indo-Pacific. South Korea isn’t a member of either alliance.

Peter Dutton, Australia’s defense minister, said the artillery being purchased from South Korea would enable its army to fire and move quickly, helping them to avoid enemy counterattack. The military equipment will be manufactured at a new facility at Geelong, near Melbourne.

For South Korea, supplying weapons to countries such as Australia needs to be balanced against China’s ability to sway behavior by a nuclear-armed North Korea.

In translated remarks, South Korean President Moon Jae-in said his visit to Australia this week had “nothing to do with our position over China” and the arms deal was important to South Korea’s national interest while helping the economy recover from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Australia has warned of a worsening security environment in the Indo-Pacific region as its relations with China deteriorate. China was angered over Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s call last year for an international investigation into the first outbreak of Covid-19 in China, and has imposed a series of import restrictions and tariffs on Australian products including coal, beef and barley.

This year, Australia established the AUKUS security partnership with the U.S. and the U.K., under which the U.S. will help Australia to [build nuclear-powered submarine capabilities](#) and deepen security cooperation in cyberspace, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies and undersea capabilities. The pact effectively terminated a deal with France to build conventional submarines, angering its European ally, which called the decision a betrayal.

On Friday, Australia said it would seek to buy up to 40 UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters from the U.S. to replace its troubled MRH-90 Taipan fleet, used by the Australian Army as its utility helicopter. Mr. Dutton said Australia’s MRH-90 fleet had been unreliable and would cost substantially more than expected to keep in service until 2037 as planned.

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HEADLINE	12/11 Denmark omicron surge: warning to world
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/government-economy/denmarks-omicron-surge-is-a-warning-to-the-rest-of-world">https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/government-economy/denmarks-omicron-surge-is-a-warning-to-the-rest-of-world</a>
GIST	<p>[STOCKHOLM] Denmark is seeing the number of people infected with the Omicron variant of Covid-19 double every second day, offering a glimpse of a development that is probably unfolding throughout Europe.</p> <p>The Nordic country can offer valuable insights into what to expect from Omicron, as it has Europe's most rigorous screening programme, with a high level of testing, and variant-screening of all positive PCR tests.</p> <p>That explains why Denmark has reported the highest number of Omicron cases in the European Union, Troels Lillebaek, chair of the Danish Sars-CoV-2 variant assessment committee, said.</p> <p>"Denmark is not a hotspot for Omicron compared with any other European country," Lillebaek said in an interview on Friday (Dec 10). "I'm quite sure that what we are seeing now in Denmark is also happening in neighbouring countries, and in other European countries."</p> <p>The first Omicron infection in Denmark was detected in a sample from Nov 22. Since then, 1,280 cases have been recorded, and Omicron represented 4.5-5 per cent of all Covid-19 infections in the country in the beginning of this week.</p>

	<p>While based on limited data that could be skewed, the information from Statens Serum Institut also shows that almost 75 per cent of those infected by Omicron had received 2 doses of Covid-19 vaccine.</p> <p>"You would like that number to be lower," Lillebaek said. "Then again, it's important to know that testing positive doesn't necessarily mean that there's no effect when it comes to severe disease or admissions to hospital."</p> <p>Lab studies conducted by vaccine manufacturers Pfizer and BioNTech have indicated that a third dose may restore protection against the Omicron variant. Still, the Danish data shows more than 100 Omicron cases were discovered among the 19.3 per cent of Danes who have received booster shots.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/12 Iran space launch approaching?</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/iran-space-launches-nuclear-deal-72a010e26d3ff0395fd09b7c1b3e51d5">https://apnews.com/article/iran-space-launches-nuclear-deal-72a010e26d3ff0395fd09b7c1b3e51d5</a>
GIST	<p>DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran appears to be preparing for a space launch as negotiations continue in Vienna over its tattered nuclear deal with world powers, according to an expert and satellite images.</p> <p>The likely blast off at Iran's Imam Khomeini Spaceport comes as Iranian state media has offered a list of upcoming planned satellite launches in the works for the Islamic Republic's civilian space program, which has been beset by <a href="#">a series of failed launches</a>. Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard runs its own parallel program that successfully put <a href="#">a satellite into orbit last year</a>.</p> <p>Conducting a launch amid the Vienna talks fits the hard-line posture struck by Tehran's negotiators, who already described six previous rounds of diplomacy as a "draft," exasperating Western nations. Germany's new foreign minister has gone as far as to warn that "time is running out for us at this point."</p> <p>But all this fits into a renewed focus on space by Iran's hard-line President Ebrahim Raisi, said Jeffrey Lewis, an expert at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies who studies Tehran's program. With Iran's former President Hassan Rouhani who shepherded the nuclear deal out of office, concerns about alienating the talks with launches that the U.S. asserts aids Tehran's ballistic missile program likely have faded.</p> <p>"They're not walking on eggshells," Lewis said. "I think Raisi's people have a new balance in mind."</p> <p>Iranian state media did not acknowledge the activity at the spaceport and Iran's mission to the United Nations did not respond to a request for comment. The U.S. military, which tracks space launches, did not respond to requests for comment.</p> <p>Satellite images taken Saturday by Planet Labs Inc. obtained by The Associated Press show activity at the spaceport in the desert plains of Iran's rural Semnan province, some 240 kilometers (150 miles) southeast of Tehran.</p> <p>A support vehicle stood parked alongside a massive white gantry that typically houses a rocket on the launch pad. That support vehicle has appeared in other satellite photos at the site just ahead of a launch. Also visible is a hydraulic crane with a railed platform, also seen before previous launches and likely used to service the rocket.</p> <p>Other satellite images in recent days at the spaceport have shown an increase in the number of cars at the facility, another sign of heightened activity that typically precedes a launch. A building also believed to be the "checkout" facility for a rocket has seen increased activity as well, Lewis said.</p> <p>"This is fairly traditional pre-launch activity," he told the AP.</p>

The activity comes after Iran's state-run IRNA news agency on Dec. 5 published an article saying its space program had four satellites ready for launch. It described one, the low-orbit imaging satellite Zafar 2, as being "under the final phase of preparation." Zafar, which means "victory" in Farsi, weighs some 113 kilograms (250 pounds).

The Zafar 1, however, [failed to enter orbit after a February 2020 launch at the spaceport](#). That launch used a Simorgh, or "Phoenix," rocket, but it failed to put the satellite into orbit at the correct speed, according to Iranian officials at the time. Iran had spent just under 2 million euros to build the satellite.

Iran's civilian space program has seen a series of setbacks and fatal explosions plague it in recent years.

One mysterious blast even caught the attention of then-President Donald Trump in 2019, who tweeted out what appeared to be [a classified U.S. spy satellite picture of the explosion's aftermath](#) with the caption: "The United States of America was not involved in the catastrophic accident."

Meanwhile, the Guard in April 2020 revealed its own secret space program by successfully launching a satellite into orbit. The head of the U.S. Space Command later dismissed the satellite as "a tumbling webcam in space" that wouldn't provide Iran vital intelligence — though it showed Tehran's ability to successfully get into orbit.

Over the past decade, Iran has sent several short-lived satellites into orbit and in 2013 launched a monkey into space. But under Raisi, Iran's Supreme Council of Space has met for the first time in 11 years, according to a recent report by state-run television.

Raisi said at the November meeting that it "shows the determination of this government to develop the space industry." A high-ranking member of the Guard who runs its aerospace program, Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh, attended the meeting along with Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian.

The U.S. alleges such satellite launches defy a U.N. Security Council resolution calling on Iran to undertake no activity related to ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons.

Iran, which long has said it does not seek nuclear weapons, maintains its satellite launches and rocket tests do not have a military component. Tehran also says it hasn't violated the U.N. resolution as it only "called upon" Tehran not to conduct such tests.

But the possible launch also comes as tensions again rise over Iran's nuclear program. Since Trump unilaterally withdrew America from Tehran's nuclear accord with world powers in 2018, Iran slowly abandoned all the limits the deal put on its program.

Today, Tehran enriches uranium up to 60% purity — a short technical step from weapons-grade levels of 90%. Its stockpile of enriched uranium also continues to grow and international inspectors face challenges in monitoring its advances.

Lewis said he expects to see the space program accelerate given Raisi's interest.

"They're not constrained by worries about the Iran deal in the same way that Rouhani was," he said.

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HEADLINE	12/12 UK hikes virus alert level; omicron surge
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-europe-england-a32ff1844911b50d0b09dd1013e16bab">https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-europe-england-a32ff1844911b50d0b09dd1013e16bab</a>
GIST	<p>LONDON (AP) — The British government raised the country's official coronavirus threat level on Sunday, warning the rapid spread of the omicron variant had pushed the U.K. into risky territory.</p> <p>The chief medical officers of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland said the emergence of the highly transmissible new strain "adds additional and rapidly increasing risk to the public and health care</p>

services” at a time when COVID-19 is already widespread. They recommended raising the alert level from 3 to 4 on a 5-point scale. The top level, 5, indicates authorities think the health care system is about to be overwhelmed.

The doctors said early evidence shows omicron is spreading much faster than the currently dominant delta variant, and that vaccines offer less protection against it. British officials say omicron is likely to replace delta as the dominant strain in the U.K. within days.

“Data on severity will become clearer over the coming weeks but hospitalizations from omicron are already occurring and these are likely to increase rapidly,” they said.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson was due to make a televised statement about Britain’s coronavirus situation and the booster vaccination campaign on Sunday evening.

Concerns about the new variant led Johnson’s Conservative government to reintroduce restrictions that were lifted almost six months ago. Masks must be worn in most indoor settings, vaccine certificates must be shown to enter nightclubs and people are being urged to work from home if possible.

Many scientists say that’s unlikely to be enough, however, and are calling for tougher measures.

Johnson’s government is trying to avoid that, but aims to offer everyone 18 and over a booster shot by the end of January.

Scientists in South Africa, where omicron was first identified, say they see signs it may cause less severe disease than delta, but caution that it is too soon to be certain.

The U.K. Health Security Agency said Friday that both the AstraZeneca and Pfizer vaccines appear less effective in preventing symptomatic infections in people exposed to omicron, though preliminary data show that effectiveness appears to rise to between 70% and 75% after a third vaccine dose.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/12 Crews search for missing after tornadoes</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/tornadoes-kentucky-illinois-arkansas-tennessee-missouri-e1ae21e0b7521c28411f8c360b756700">https://apnews.com/article/tornadoes-kentucky-illinois-arkansas-tennessee-missouri-e1ae21e0b7521c28411f8c360b756700</a>
GIST	<p>MAYFIELD, Ky. (AP) — Rescuers in an increasingly bleak search picked through the tornado-splintered ruins of Kentucky homes and businesses Sunday, including a candle factory that was bustling with night-shift employees when it was flattened, as the governor warned that the state’s death toll from the outbreak could top 100.</p> <p>Workers who had been rushing to produce Christmas candles sought refuge in what was supposed to be the safest part of the Mayfield Consumer Products factory, but it may not have mattered because the twister Friday night was so monstrous, Gov. Andy Beshear said.</p> <p>Authorities on Saturday reported rescuing 40 of the 110 people who were in the building at the time, but by Sunday morning, more than 24 hours had elapsed since anyone had been pulled out alive.</p> <p>“It’ll be a miracle if we pull anybody else out of that. It’s now 15 feet deep of steel and cars on top of where the roof was,” the governor said on CNN. “Just tough.”</p> <p>Jeremy Creason, Mayfield’s fire chief and emergency services director, said rescuers had to crawl over the dead to get to the living.</p> <p>Kentucky was the worst-hit state by far in an unusual mid-December swarm of twisters across the Midwest and the South that leveled entire communities and left at least 14 people dead in five other states.</p>



“I can tell you from reports that I’ve received I know we’ve lost more than 80 Kentuckians. That number is going to exceed more than 100,” Beshear said.

“I’ve got towns that are gone, that are just, I mean gone. My dad’s hometown – half of it isn’t standing. It is hard for me to describe. I know people can see the visuals, but that goes on for 12 blocks or more in some of these places.”

He said that going door to door in search of victims is out of the question in the hardest-hit areas: “There are no doors.” With afternoon high temperatures forecast only in the 40s, tens of thousands of people were without power.

Candle factory worker Autumn Kirks said she and her boyfriend, Lannis Ward, were about 10 feet apart in a hallway when someone said “Duck and cover!”

“I pulled my safety goggles down, jumped under the closest thing, and seconds later I looked to my left, and instead of wall there was sky and lightning and just destruction everywhere,” she said.

While checking on other workers, Kirks said, she glanced away from Ward, who was among the missing Sunday. “I remember taking my eyes off of him for a second, and then he was gone. I don’t know where he went, don’t have any idea,” she said.

Kirks was at a ministry center where people gathered, seeking information about the missing. One woman entered the building weeping, a state trooper came in with teddy bears, and a golden retriever was there to offer pet therapy.

The tornado that carved the path of destruction in Kentucky touched down for more than 200 miles (320 kilometers) in the state. Eleven people were reported killed in and around Bowling Green alone.

If early reports are confirmed, the twister “will likely go down perhaps as one of the longest track violent tornadoes in United States history,” said Victor Gensini, a researcher on extreme weather at Northern Illinois University.

The storm was all the more remarkable because it came in December, when normally colder weather limits tornadoes.

The outbreak also killed at least six people in Illinois, where an Amazon distribution center in Edwardsville was hit; four in Tennessee; two in Arkansas, where a nursing home was destroyed and the governor said workers shielded residents with their own bodies; and two in Missouri.

Debris from destroyed buildings and shredded trees covered the ground in Mayfield, a city of about 10,000 in western Kentucky. Twisted sheet metal, downed power lines and wrecked vehicles lined the streets. Windows were blown out and roofs torn off the buildings that were still standing.

In the shadows of their crumpled church sanctuaries, two congregations in Mayfield came together on Sunday to pray for those who were lost. Members of First Christian Church and First Presbyterian Church met in a parking lot surrounded by rubble, piles of broken bricks and metal.

“Our little town will never be the same, but we’re resilient,” Laura McClendon said. “We’ll get there, but it’s going to take a long time.”

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HEADLINE	12/12 Swollen rivers flood streets in Spain
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/dead-swollen-rivers-flood-streets-spain-81704926">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/dead-swollen-rivers-flood-streets-spain-81704926</a>
GIST	MADRID -- Swollen rivers burst their banks in north and northeastern Spain, with the flooding blamed Sunday for the death of at least one person.

	<p>Emergency services said they retrieved the body of a 61-year-old man from inside the cab of his submerged van in a river in the Navarra region.</p> <p>The man was reported missing on Friday and his vehicle was spotted the following day, but the fast-flowing river made a rescue operation impossible, officials said.</p> <p>The combination of a heavy, dayslong storm and thawing snow brought a surge in the River Ebro and its tributaries, Spanish meteorological services said.</p> <p>The Ebro's flow rate doubled from Friday to Sunday and surpassed the rate that in 2015 caused widespread flooding in the region, authorities said.</p> <p>The flooding since Friday's surge cut numerous roads and flooded streets, notably in the medieval city of Tudela which is located in the Ebro Valley about 250 kilometers (155 miles) north of Madrid.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/12 Haiti violence spikes, aid groups struggle</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/violence-haiti-spikes-aid-groups-struggle-81706421">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/violence-haiti-spikes-aid-groups-struggle-81706421</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti -- A spike in violence has deepened hunger and poverty in Haiti while hindering the very aid organizations combating those problems in a country whose government struggles to provide basic services.</p> <p>Few relief workers are willing to speak on the record about the cuts — perhaps worried about drawing attention following the October kidnapping of 17 people from Ohio-based Christian Aid Ministries — 12 of whom remain held hostage.</p> <p>But several confirmed, without giving details, that they had sent some staff out of the country and have been forced to temporarily cut back aid operations.</p> <p>Gang-related kidnappings and shootings have prevented aid groups from visiting parts of the capital, Port-au-Prince, and beyond where they had previously distributed food, water and other basic goods.</p> <p>A severe shortage of fuel also has kept agencies from operating at full capacity.</p> <p>“It’s just getting worse in every way possible,” said Margaret Lubin, Haiti director for CORE, a U.S. nonprofit organization.</p> <p>“You see the situation deteriorating day after day, impacting life at every level,” Lubin said, adding that aid organizations have gone into "survival mode."</p> <p>Few places in the world are so dependent on aid groups as Haiti, a nation frequently called “the republic of NGOs.” Billions of dollars in aid have been poured through hundreds – by some estimates several thousand – of aid groups even as the government has grown steadily weaker and less effective.</p> <p>Shortly after the July 7 assassination of the president, Prime Minister Ariel Henry assumed leadership of a country still trying to regain political stability. Nearly all the seats in parliament are vacant and there's no firm date yet for long-delayed elections, though Henry said he expects them early next year.</p> <p>Less than a dozen elected officials are currently representing a country of more than 11 million people.</p> <p>And in the streets, the gangs hold power.</p> <p>More than 460 kidnappings have been reported by Haiti's National Police so far this year, more than double what was reported last year, according to the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti.</p>

The agency said Haitians are “living in hell under the yoke of armed gangs. Rapes, murders, thefts, armed attacks, kidnappings continue to be committed daily, on populations often left to fend for themselves in disadvantaged and marginalized neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince and beyond.”

The agency added: “Without being able to access these areas under the control of gangs, we are far from knowing and measuring the extent of these abuses and what Haitians really experience on a daily basis...

“Humanitarian actors have also limited their interventions due to the security risks to their staff and access challenges,” it added.

Large organizations like the U.N. World Food Program have found alternate ways to help people, such as using barges rather than vulnerable trucks to ferry goods from the capital to Haiti’s southern region. But smaller organizations don’t always have such means.

World Vision United States, which is based in Federal Way, Washington and helps children in Haiti, told The Associated Press that it has relocated at least 11 of 320 employees as a result of the violence and is taking undisclosed security measures for other staff.

Water Mission, a South Carolina nonprofit, said it’s exploring relocating to other areas in Haiti and it said kidnappings and overall violence have forced it to change staffing plans to ensure people’s safety.

“These issues sometimes result in slower progress in our ongoing safe water project work,” the organization said. “However, we continue with our work despite any temporary interruptions that arise.”

The difficulties come at a time of growing pleas for help. A magnitude 7.2 earthquake in mid-August destroyed tens of thousands of homes and killed more than 2,200 people. The country also is struggling to cope with the recent arrival of more than 12,000 deported Haitians, the majority from the U.S.

In addition, more than 20,000 people have fled their homes due to gang violence this year, according to UNICEF, with many living in temporary shelters amid extremely unsanitary conditions and the pandemic. The U.N. agency estimates it needs \$97 million to help 1 million people in Haiti next year.

Among them is Martin Jean Junior, a 50-year-old who used to resell scrap metal. He said his house was set on fire in mid-June amid fighting between police and gangs.

“I have been in the streets since,” he said as he lay on a blue sheet he had spread on the hard floor of a Port-au-Prince school temporarily converted into a shelter.

Things could soon get even worse: A prominent gang leader warned Haitians this week to avoid the embattled community of Martissant because rival gangs will fight each other in upcoming days.

“Even the dogs and the rats won’t be saved. Anything that moves, trucks, motorcycles, people, will be considered allies of Ti-Bois,” the gang leader known as “Izo” said in a video, referring to a rival gang. “Martissant is declared a combat zone, and those who ignore this warning will pay with their life.”

Most already avoid the area for fear of being kidnapped, shot or having cargo looted. That has largely cut off the country’s southern peninsula because the main highway runs through the neighborhood.

Those recently killed by crossfire in Martissant include a nurse, a 7-year-old girl and at least five passengers aboard a public bus. The violence forced the aid group Doctors Without Borders in August to close an emergency clinic that had served the community for 15 years.

Liman Pierre, a 40-year-old mechanic, said he recently had to cross Martissant to go to work and saw four dead people, including two elderly neighbors and the motorcycle driver transporting them.

"The criminals kill with impunity and abandon the dead to the dogs," he said. "Those who aren't devoured by dogs are set on fire, pure and simple. This can't be."

For now, Pierre is sleeping on the streets of Port-au-Prince because he fears having to cross Martissant to get back home: "You don't even get the opportunity to visit parents and friends who are in difficulty."

"The state doesn't exist," Pierre said. "Criminals have been in power for over six months. It is December, and we do not see the light at the end of the tunnel."

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HEADLINE	12/12 Covid deaths hit 800,000; global highest
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/us-covid-19-deaths-approach-800000-delta-ravaged-2021-2021-12-12/">https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/us-covid-19-deaths-approach-800000-delta-ravaged-2021-2021-12-12/</a>
GIST	<p>Dec 12 (Reuters) - The United States on Sunday reached 800,000 coronavirus-related deaths, according to a Reuters tally, as the nation braces for a potential surge in infections due to more time spent indoors with colder weather and the highly transmissible Omicron variant of the virus.</p> <p>The milestone means the U.S. death toll from this one virus now exceeds the entire population of North Dakota.</p> <p>Even with vaccines widely and freely available, the country has lost more lives to the virus this year than in 2020 due to the more contagious Delta variant and people refusing to get inoculated against COVID-19. Since the start of the year, over 450,000 people in the <a href="#">United States</a> have died after contracting COVID-19, or 57% of all U.S. deaths from the illness since the pandemic started.</p> <p>The deaths this year were mostly in unvaccinated patients, health experts say. Deaths have increased despite advances in caring for COVID patients and new treatment options such as monoclonal antibodies.</p> <p>It took 111 days for U.S. deaths to jump from 600,000 to 700,000, according to Reuters analysis. The next 100,000 deaths took just 73 days.</p> <p>Other countries have lost far fewer lives per capita in the past 11 months, according to the Reuters analysis.</p> <p>Among the Group of Seven (G7) wealthiest nations, the United States ranks the worst in terms of per capita deaths from COVID-19 between Jan. 1 and Nov. 30, according to the Reuters analysis.</p> <p>The death rate in the United States was more than three times higher than in neighboring Canada and 11 times more than Japan.</p> <p>Even when the United States is compared with a larger pool of wealthy countries <a href="#">with access to vaccines</a>, it ranks near the bottom. Among the 38 members of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), <a href="#">the United States ranks 30th</a>. Only Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Latvia Colombia, Poland and Slovenia had more COVID-19 deaths per capita. New Zealand had the least.</p> <p>When compared with the European Union, the United States has 1.3 times the per capita deaths reported in the last 11 months than the entire bloc.</p> <p>Among more than 200 nations and territories tracked by Reuters, the United States ranks 36th.</p> <p>The United States has the highest number of reported total COVID-19 deaths in the world, followed by Brazil and India, according to the Reuters tally. With just 4% of the world's population, the country accounts for about 14% of all reported COVID-19 deaths and 19% of cases worldwide. The country is set to soon surpass 50 million cases.</p>

New infections in the United States were averaging around 120,000 a day, with Michigan contributing the most cases a day. COVID-19 patients were filling Michigan hospitals at record levels, with three out of four of them unvaccinated, according to [Michigan Health & Hospital Association](#) (MHA).

Scientists [are still evaluating](#) the impact of the new Omicron variant and whether vaccines could provide adequate protection against it.

#### 'MUST ACT TOGETHER'

The Delta variant remains the dominant version of the virus in the United States.

Of the 10 states that reported [the most deaths per capita](#) in the last 11 months, eight were from the country's south – Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Mississippi, South Carolina and West Virginia, according to [the Reuters analysis](#).

Roughly 60% of the U.S. population has been fully vaccinated against COVID-19, CDC data showed.

Fears of the new variant have prompted Americans to line up for booster doses of COVID-19 vaccines at a record pace. Just under a million people a day received booster doses of one of the three authorized vaccines last week, the highest rate since regulators gave the nod to additional shots.

"We must act together in this moment to address the impact of the current cases we are seeing, which are largely Delta, and to prepare ourselves for the possibility of more Omicron," U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said at [a White House briefing](#) on Tuesday.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/12 Israel PM visits UAE; to meet crown prince</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/israeli-prime-minister-naftali-bennett-to-visit-united-arab-emirates-11639303037?mod=hp_listb_pos3">https://www.wsj.com/articles/israeli-prime-minister-naftali-bennett-to-visit-united-arab-emirates-11639303037?mod=hp_listb_pos3</a>
GIST	<p>Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett will meet Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan on Monday in the first official trip to the United Arab Emirates by an Israeli leader since <a href="#">the countries established diplomatic ties</a>.</p> <p>The meeting is set to take place during negotiations between world powers and Iran to constrain Tehran's <a href="#">expanding nuclear program</a>. Israel and the U.A.E. aren't part of the negotiations, but Mr. Bennett's government <a href="#">has raised alarms about the direction of the talks</a> and Sheikh Mohammed has sought to counter Iranian influence throughout the region.</p> <p>Mr. Bennett, who arrived Sunday, said he would be discussing cooperation on a number of fronts, including strengthening economic ties.</p> <p>"This is just the beginning," he said before boarding his plane in Israel.</p> <p>The U.A.E. and Israel began normalizing their relations last year after nearly 50 years of having no diplomatic ties. It sparked a flurry of diplomatic activity that saw other Arab countries, including Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco, initiate formal ties with Israel, in what have become known as <a href="#">the Abraham Accords</a>.</p> <p>Israel's former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who signed the accords, was meant to fly to Abu Dhabi last year but Jordan's delay in approving his flight over the country forced him to cancel plans.</p> <p>The accords marked a diplomatic departure for Israeli-Arab relations. For decades normalization had been conditioned on Israeli peace efforts with the Palestinians, but President <a href="#">Donald Trump</a> tried a different tack, encouraging Arab countries to establish ties through a series of sweeteners, including the removal of hurdles to the U.A.E. <a href="#">importing F-35 jet fighters</a>.</p>

Mr. Bennett's one-day trip is the latest in a series of remarkable diplomatic moves in the Middle East in recent weeks, as the Iran nuclear talks show little progress in Vienna.

Sheikh Mohammed [traveled to Turkey](#) to meet longtime rival President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has backed Islamist movements across the region that the U.A.E. sees as a national security threat. The U.A.E. has also sent a top national-security adviser to Iran, while the Saudis have held quiet talks with Iran over re-establishing ties.

Israel has urged the U.S. to take a tougher stance with Iran and has said it reserves the right to strike Iran with force. Benny Gantz, the Israeli defense minister, was in Washington last week for talks with U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

Mr. Bennett's planned visit to the U.A.E., which he said Sunday was at Sheikh Mohammed's invitation, marks the most visible example of the regional cooperation sparked by the Abraham Accords, particularly against shared regional rival Iran.

Last month, following months of covert strikes between Iranian and Israeli-linked sea vessels, Israel, the U.A.E and the U.S. launched joint exercises in the Red Sea to counter Iranian naval moves.

"(Iran's) presence is something we need to push back as much as possible from the state of Israel, from the Red Sea, from the areas that harm our freedom to sail," said a senior Israeli naval officer. "In order to do that, we need to make our partnerships tighter."

New diplomatic relations with the U.A.E. and other Arab countries have yielded mixed economic dividends, with the successes coming primarily from state-backed projects.

Registered trade between Israel and the U.A.E. increased 10-fold, according to official Israeli data from January to October that showed bilateral trade at \$874.5 million during that period. The data, however, doesn't account for some of the biggest successes of the past year, including a sale by Israel's Delek Drilling in its offshore Tamar gas field to Abu Dhabi's Mubadala wealth fund.

Other sales not accounted for include tech and defense. In November at the Dubai Air Show, Israel Aerospace Industries Ltd. signed a deal with Dubai's Emirates Airline to convert four passenger liners to freight planes. The Israeli state-owned aeronautics company also struck a deal with Emirati defense company Edge to produce a series of unmanned surface vehicles, also known as drone ships. The vehicles can be used for pollution monitoring or submarine detections, among other applications, said the companies.

The value of the deals weren't disclosed.

Last month, the U.A.E. also brokered a deal between Israel and Jordan, who have maintained strained ties for decades, to build renewable electricity and desalination plants around the shared Jordan River. Solar plants are expected to produce 600 megawatts of electricity in Jordan, which will be exported to Israel. In return, Israel will build desalination plants to export 200 million cubic meters of water to Jordan.

Fighting in May between the Israeli military and Hamas in Gaza was a test for the Israel-U.A.E. relationship, but even amid the worst of it, both sides were eager to promote tourism between the two countries. Measures were taken on both sides to allow for visa-free travel and the first-ever commercial routes between them, and government data showed hundreds of thousands of Israeli tourists visited the U.A.E. so far this year.

The two countries' business communities have also grown closer. Emiratis have invested hundreds of millions of dollars into Israeli companies, according to assessments based on media reports, the Israeli official said.



	<p>The main interests of Emirati investors are in food and water technology, as well as renewable energy, the official said. The Emiratis would also like to see Israeli companies scaling up their businesses inside the U.A.E., using the country as a financial and logistics hub and as a gateway to increase exports to Asia.</p> <p>In Late November, OurCrowd, Israel's most active venture capital fund, became the first to open up offices in the U.A.E. for direct investment in Emirati companies.</p> <p>"We need to take a long term approach to building these ties. It's not about this week's deal or even next month's. It's about building a strong and enduring foundation for joint activity between our two countries in the decades and centuries to come," said Jon Medved, CEO of the company.</p> <p>In recent weeks Israel has also hosted a series of events at Dubai's Expo 2020 world fair, including Hanukkah celebrations and an interfaith event.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/12 Vaccination, office return plans upended</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/companies-upend-plans-on-covid-19-vaccines-and-office-returns-again-11639321203?mod=hp_lead_pos4">https://www.wsj.com/articles/companies-upend-plans-on-covid-19-vaccines-and-office-returns-again-11639321203?mod=hp_lead_pos4</a>
GIST	<p>Companies knew to expect pandemic surprises heading into winter. They just keep coming.</p> <p>The Biden administration's vaccine mandate is in limbo. The threat of the Omicron variant is still being studied. <a href="#">International travel is getting more restrictive</a> again.</p> <p>The muddled picture is causing a broad reassessment across the corporate sphere. Some companies are rethinking vaccine policies and pushing off return-to-office plans, while others are working to maintain existing timelines to bring people together. The varied responses reflect the difficulties many companies face in sizing up the state of the pandemic now and its trajectory in the months ahead, more than a dozen executives said.</p> <p>Meanwhile, the longer that delays persist, the more some <a href="#">employees get set in their at-home routines</a> and gain conviction they can do their jobs from anywhere, for the long term.</p> <p>Companies are "facing the same obstacles all of us are, which is imperfect information and the rise of unknowns," said Joshua Bixby, chief executive officer of <a href="#">Fastly</a> Inc., a cloud-services provider that has embraced remote work and closed its San Francisco headquarters through April 2022. "It's hard."</p> <p>In recent days, companies as varied as <a href="#">Facebook</a> parent Meta Platforms Inc., <a href="#">Ford Motor</a> Co. and <a href="#">Alphabet</a> Inc.'s Google have <a href="#">delayed return-to-office dates</a> or given employees the option to stay home longer. Ride-hailing company <a href="#">Lyft</a> Inc. told its corporate employees last week they wouldn't be required back in its offices until 2023.</p> <p>When executives at <a href="#">Jefferies Financial Group</a> Inc. noticed their number of Covid-19 cases increasing last week with a rise on Tuesday, it took the company only a day of discussion before making changes, President Brian Friedman said. The investment bank's staff already had been working in a hybrid capacity, with employees splitting time between home and the office. Executives sent a memo to employees canceling holiday parties and group client meetings for the rest of the month. Staff was told to also avoid "all but the most essential business travel."</p> <p>The bank said it would re-evaluate in early January what to do for the rest of the winter.</p> <p>"We are highly disappointed to need to take this step, but it is the prudent path forward," the company said in the memo.</p> <p>In the fall, when a number of prominent companies set return-to-work plans for early 2022, many had reason to feel some measure of certainty in the months ahead. The Biden administration had announced a</p>

slate of vaccination mandates—for federal contractors, healthcare workers and private employers with more than 100 employees—that some executives said gave them cover to institute policies of their own. The federal mandates have since been blocked by U.S. judges.

After a federal judge last Tuesday [issued a nationwide preliminary injunction](#) to block the Biden administration’s plan to mandate vaccines for federal contractors, companies including [General Electric](#) Co. and [Union Pacific](#) Corp. [suspended Covid-19 vaccine requirements](#) for workers but said they planned to continue encouraging vaccines. Other federal contractors, like [Raytheon Technologies](#) Corp. , kept vaccine mandates in place.

The Business Roundtable, a trade group representing CEOs of top U.S. companies, wrote a letter to the Labor Department’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration on Dec. 6 regarding the Biden administration’s new vaccine-or-test mandate for companies with at least 100 employees, according to the letter, which was reviewed by The Wall Street Journal. The Business Roundtable requested OSHA extend the deadline for companies to comply with the mandate by 60 days, according to the letter.

The “administrative challenges—landing during the busiest time of the year in many industries—are proving overwhelming for many employers to implement in this time frame,” the letter said.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) said a mandate isn’t going to work. “Because we’re hearing from all of the business community, all of them, that they’re afraid their employees, a significant number of them, will simply refuse to come to work,” Mr. McConnell said during The Wall Street Journal’s CEO Council summit last week. “And that’s already a big problem.”

Office occupancy has ticked up in recent weeks, though many spaces remain largely empty. In 10 major U.S. cities, 40.6% of the workforce was back in the office as of early December, according to Kastle Systems, which tracks access-card swipes into buildings.

Some executives say they have navigated a return to the office with relative ease. [Fiverr International](#) Ltd. , a marketplace for freelance workers, began a hybrid schedule in an office in New York in November. Some companies have avoided making decisions on workplace policies out of fear of angering employees, said Micha Kaufman, Fiverr’s chief executive officer, when instead they should decide plans that work best for their corporate cultures.

“Some companies are making decisions out of pressure,” he said, adding that many are hoping to avoid angering employees.

Those struggling the most right now are the companies that have committed to eventually reopening offices on largely pre-pandemic schedules, said Mr. Bixby of Fastly, who has discussed the issue with executives at a range of companies. “For that group of executives, it’s really messy,” he said, since many employees have moved away from company sites while working remotely, or have vowed to find other work once they are eventually called back to offices.

Some executives got ahead of themselves in thinking the pandemic had been easing, only to then need to pause or adjust some back-to-office or international travel plans, said Pat Gelsinger, chief executive officer of Intel Corp.

“Frankly, we’re never going to be back to normal,” Mr. Gelsinger said at the Journal event. “We’re going to be in a state of play where we’re living with some level of Covid for many, many years to come.”

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HEADLINE	12/12 Covid surges in states after Thanksgiving
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-19-cases-rise-in-many-states-after-thanksgiving-11639317602?mod=hp_lead_pos3">https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-19-cases-rise-in-many-states-after-thanksgiving-11639317602?mod=hp_lead_pos3</a>

Covid-19 is surging in many parts of the country in the wake of Thanksgiving, with Christmastime gatherings on the horizon.

Health authorities in some hard-hit states, like Vermont, New Jersey and Maine, say people who became infected after traveling or gathering indoors for Thanksgiving are likely adding to the Covid-19 numbers. Some 35 states have higher seven-day averages for new cases than they did before Thanksgiving, according to Johns Hopkins University data, with some of the biggest increases in the Northeast.

Epidemiologists believe colder weather, which draws people back inside where respiratory viruses can more easily spread, plays a big role.

The U.S. seven-day average for new cases is about 120,000 a day, according to Johns Hopkins, up from a recent low near 71,000 in late October, when surges triggered by the Delta variant slowed in the South before starting to hit hard in northern states. The U.S. is averaging about 1,270 daily Covid-19 deaths, which tend to lag behind cases by several weeks—about 160 ahead of the pre-Thanksgiving level.

“We have experienced, as we expected and predicted, a post-Thanksgiving spike,” New Jersey Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy said last week, regarding cases in the state. The seven-day case average there, recently about 4,170 new cases daily, has doubled since before the holiday. “There’s no other way really to look at these numbers.”

Governors and public health officials are assessing the Thanksgiving impact as cases from the new Omicron variant are growing around the U.S. However, the Delta variant overwhelmingly remains the cause of new cases, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

As Christmas nears, U.S. officials have largely shied away from significant new restrictions. Instead, they are continuing to implore residents to get vaccinated, including booster shots. Health authorities are also asking people to know the vaccination status of people with whom they celebrate, urging rapid tests to check for infections and continued mask use.

“Be careful about having a whole, whole, whole bunch of people indoors at the festivities,” Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear, a Democrat, said during a press conference. He warned about cases ramping up again there.

In New York, Democratic Gov. Kathy Hochul said Friday that residents need to wear masks in public indoor places that don’t require vaccinations starting Monday.

Zeroing in on the Thanksgiving impact is difficult. There was a big, artificial drop in cases around the holiday as states slowed their data reporting, and then some apparent catch-up as reporting resumed, said Emily Pond, a research data analyst at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security.

Hospitals in many states are under rising pressure from Covid-19, including in Maine and New Hampshire, where the governors are deploying National Guard troops to bolster staffs.

Early last January, shortly after Christmas and before widespread vaccinations, Covid-19 hospitalizations peaked and the U.S. had its deadliest week with nearly 26,000 Covid-19 deaths, federal data show.

Health officials hope that won’t happen again, including in parts of the country with higher vaccination rates like the Northeast. More people have also acquired immune protection since last winter through Covid-19 infections.

“In many ways, we’re in a much better place than last winter,” Edward Lifshitz, medical director of the communicable disease service for New Jersey’s health department. About 69% of the state’s population is fully vaccinated, compared with closer to 61% for the U.S. overall.

Jolianne Stone, Oklahoma's state epidemiologist, said she hopes the state's lower full-vaccination rate, recently 52.4%, is also enough to restrain hospitalizations and deaths there. The rate has risen about 9 percentage points since the peak of the state's most recent hospitalization surge this summer.

Omicron worries may also encourage more people to get shots in the coming weeks, she said.

One clue about the nation's Covid-19 trajectory comes from wastewater samples, which communities are using to scan for levels of the coronavirus that causes Covid-19. The latest data from Cambridge, Mass., firm Biobot Analytics Inc., which currently analyzes wastewater samples covering about 15 million people around the U.S., broadly show rising virus concentrations.

Given current trends, the pandemic is likely to worsen before it improves, said Philip Landrigan, an epidemiologist who directs the Program for Global Public Health and the Common Good at Boston College.

"I can't imagine it's going to go anywhere but up," he said. "The message to put out to the public is please be wary and please think about the people around you."

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HEADLINE	<b>12/12 Omicron: what is known about the variant</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/article/omicron-coronavirus-variant.html">https://www.nytimes.com/article/omicron-coronavirus-variant.html</a>
GIST	<p><b>What is the Omicron variant?</b></p> <p>First identified in Botswana and South Africa in November, this new iteration of the coronavirus has prompted concern among scientists and public health officials because it carries an unusually high number of mutations that make it more transmissible and less susceptible to existing vaccines.</p> <p>On Nov. 26, the World Health Organization designated Omicron a "<a href="#">variant of concern</a>" and <a href="#">warned</a> that the global risks posed by it were "very high," despite what officials described as a multitude of uncertainties. Since then, <a href="#">the variant</a> has been identified in nearly 60 countries, according to the W.H.O., on every continent except Antarctica. At the beginning of December, a California resident who returned home from South Africa was identified as the first American infected with Omicron. Officials have since detected the variant in 27 states.</p> <p><b>What do we know about Omicron's presence in the U.S.?</b></p> <p>It's too early to say how widespread the variant will become in the United States. But experts like Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, cautioned that the number is likely to markedly increase in the coming weeks.</p> <p>On Dec. 10, the C.D.C. <a href="#">released</a> a report on the first 43 cases identified in the United States. Only about one-third of those infected with Omicron had traveled internationally in the two weeks before testing positive or developing symptoms. That finding indicated that Omicron was already spreading within the United States from person to person.</p> <p>The study also offered early hints of <a href="#">how well the variant can overcome vaccination and immunity</a> from previous infections. The majority of people infected with Omicron — 34 individuals — were fully vaccinated when they developed symptoms or tested positive for Covid. Fourteen had received a booster dose as well, while six had previously been infected with the coronavirus.</p> <p>Only one of the 43 people required hospitalization, and none died. That doesn't necessary mean that Omicron is mild compared to other variants. For one thing, the sample was too small to be representative. What's more, young adults under 40 accounted for most of the cases. Older people are at far higher risk of severe Covid.</p> <p><b>Should we be worried?</b></p>

The discovery of Omicron prompted swift responses from governments worldwide. [A number of countries banned flights from southern Africa](#), or — like Israel, Japan and Morocco — barring entry of foreign travelers altogether.

Many public health experts criticized the move, arguing that Omicron had been around for weeks and had likely spread to many countries undetected. Once researchers began looking for Omicron around the world, that proved to be true.

On Dec. 9, [President Biden further tightened restrictions](#) for international travelers coming to the country.

In the first days after Omicron's discovery, scientists could not say much about Omicron's threat. They could see that it had mutations shown in other variants to speed up their transmission and allow them to partially evade immune responses. But they had to wait for more evidence to emerge to get a clearer picture of its nature.

Within a few weeks, early results of studies started coming to light. While some uncertainties remained, this evidence made it clear that Omicron poses a serious threat worldwide. "It rules out some of the rosier futures," said William Hanage, an epidemiologist at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

### **Does Omicron spread faster than other variants?**

Epidemiologists will need weeks to work out just how well Omicron spreads compared to other variants. There are many ways in which a mediocre variant may appear to be much better at getting from host to host. For example, a few random superspreader events can give the illusion that a variant is inherently more contagious.

The evidence so far does indicate that Omicron spreads faster than other variants — even Delta, which until now was the fastest spreading variant yet found. The earliest evidence came from South Africa, where Omicron rapidly grew to dominance in one province after another. In other countries, researchers have been able to catch Omicron earlier in its upswing, and the picture is the same: Omicron cases are doubling every two or three days — a much shorter time than Delta needed to double.

[For a closer look at how well Omicron spreads, British researchers](#) also observed what happened in the households of 121 people who got infected with the variant. They found that Omicron is 3.2 times more likely to cause a household infection than Delta.

Researchers do not yet know why Omicron spreads so readily. One possibility is that it can invade cells more readily; other possibilities include an ability to multiply once inside cells.

### **Does immunity from previous infections stop Omicron?**

Not very well. One reason that the Omicron-driven surge in South Africa was so surprising is that the country had already experienced extensive waves of Covid caused by earlier variants. As the result, the majority of South Africans had been infected at some point in the pandemic. Despite that immunity, a large number of South Africans have become [infected once more](#) with Omicron.

British researchers found similar results in a study they published on Dec. 10. They found that many people with Omicron had already had survived Covid. The researchers estimated that the risk of reinfection with Omicron is about five times greater than that for other variants.

This ability to evade immune defenses is probably part of the explanation for why Omicron cases are doubling so quickly. While other variants are getting knocked out by antibodies, Omicron is succeeding in infecting more cells — making it more successful at getting into more people.

### **How much protection do vaccines provide?**

When Omicron surfaced in South Africa, only 30 percent of the country's population had been vaccinated. That low vaccination rate made it difficult to determine how effective vaccines were against Omicron.

Researchers at vaccine companies and academic labs quickly launched laboratory studies to get some clues.

They mixed antibodies from vaccinated people with Omicron viruses in Petri dishes of human cells. Then they waited to see how well the antibodies blocked the viruses from replicating.

The [first batch](#) of experiments came to the same basic conclusion: Antibodies from the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine were much less successful at stopping Omicron than they were against earlier variants. But people who got a third booster shot produced much higher levels of antibodies, which do a better job fighting Omicron.

Early epidemiological studies arrived at similar conclusions. In Britain, researchers found that after six months, two doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine provided no protection at all from infection from Omicron. Two doses of Pfizer-BioNTech had an effectiveness of just 34 percent. But a Pfizer-BioNTech booster had an effectiveness of 75 percent against infection.

These results have reinvigorated vaccination efforts and spurred widespread booster campaigns in many countries to prepare for Omicron surges in the weeks to come.

### **Can vaccines reduce the severity of Covid?**

Scientists strongly suspect this will be the case, but they need more direct evidence to know for sure.

In addition to producing antibodies to coronaviruses, the vaccines also stimulate the growth of T cells that help fight the disease. T cells learn to recognize when other cells are infected with coronaviruses and then destroy them, slowing the infection. The mutations that allow Omicron to evade antibodies are not expected to let it escape the recognition of T cells.

If this turns out to be the case, scientists expect that Omicron will be very good at causing infections in vaccinated people, but will be much less likely to advance to severe disease. The result would be more mild to moderate cases, with fewer hospitalizations. Boosters will likely be even more effective at preventing severe disease.

### **How bad will a Covid case caused by Omicron be?**

The early Omicron cases raised hopes that the variant might cause milder disease than other variants. But it's too soon to know if that's true.

### **Is Covid caused by Omicron still treatable?**

Yes. Omicron can evade some monoclonal antibodies, but GSK has [reported](#) that its formulation, called sotrovimab, will probably remain effective. Medications that rein in dangerous inflammation, such as dexamethasone, will also work.

Merck, Pfizer and other companies are developing antiviral pills against Covid, and while they have yet to test the pills against Omicron, there's good reason to expect them to work. Many of Omicron's mutations are in the gene for a surface protein called spike, which is the target of antibodies. But antiviral pills like molnupiravir [target other proteins](#) that are mostly unchanged in Omicron.

### **What will Omicron do over the next few months?**

Researchers are creating mathematical models to figure out what Omicron will do in the months to come. These models, by necessity, are based on assumptions about the variant, and those assumptions may need to be altered as more evidence comes to light. But scientists can already see that Omicron is very transmissible and adept at evading immune defenses.

Researchers now expect Omicron to become dominant in many countries by the end of the year. It may then go on to [create a huge wave of cases](#) in the weeks that follow. Even if Omicron does turn out to be milder, it could still push hospitals to their limit. A smaller fraction of Omicron cases may require



hospitalization, but if the number of Omicron cases is much bigger than in previous surges, there will still be more seriously ill patients to treat.

But disease projections are not carved in stone. The variables can change if more people get vaccinated and practice safety measures in public like social distancing and mask-wearing that help contain the spread. Boosters will create an even stronger wall of defense.

Some governments are already taking further actions to fight Omicron. Denmark, for example, sent students home on Dec. 10, closed bars and took other measures to reduce crowds. And [Britain has reimposed several measures](#), and encouraged citizens to work from home.

### Why is it called Omicron?

When the W.H.O. began to name emerging variants of the coronavirus, they turned to [the Greek alphabet](#) — Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta and so on — to make them easier to describe. The first “variant of concern,” Alpha, was identified in Britain in late 2020, soon followed by Beta in South Africa.

But veterans of American sorority and fraternity life might have noticed the system has skipped the next two letters in the alphabetical order: Nu and Xi.

Officials thought Nu would be too easily confused with “new,” but the next letter, Xi, is a bit more complicated. W.H.O. officials said it was a common last name, and therefore potentially confusing. Some noted that it is also the name of China’s top leader, Xi Jinping.

A spokesman for the W.H.O. said the organization’s policy was designed to avoid “causing offense to any cultural, social, national, regional, professional, or ethnic groups.”

Next in line? Omicron. (Here’s [how it’s pronounced](#), [and here](#).)

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HEADLINE	12/11 End of the return-to-office date
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/11/business/return-to-office-2022.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/11/business/return-to-office-2022.html</a>
GIST	<p>The executives had a good feeling about Jan. 10, 2022 — the date when DocuSign’s 7,000 employees worldwide would finally come back to work.</p> <p>This deadline wouldn’t be like that earlier one in May 2020, which was always a fantasy, or August 2020, which was a bit ambitious, or October 2021, a plan derailed by the Delta variant. Fourth time’s the charm.</p> <p>“Every time we delay this we’re pushing off the inevitable,” said Joan Burke, the chief people officer, in a late November interview. “At some point in time DocuSign is going to be open.”</p> <p>That some point in time is no longer in January. The Omicron variant interjected. Just as companies from Ford Motor to Lyft have done in the past week, DocuSign postponed again. In place of a new date came the company’s promise to “reassess our plans as 2022 unfolds.”</p> <p>“Employees understand the evolving nature of what we’re dealing with makes it impossible to predict,” Ms. Burke said this month. “I can’t even remember all the dates we’ve put out there, and I’m the one who put them out there.”</p> <p>Return-to-office dates used to be like talismans; the chief executives who set them seemed to wield some power over the shape of the months to come. Then the dates were postponed, and postponed again. At some point the spell was broken. For many companies, office reopening plans have lost their fear factor, coming to seem like wishful thinking rather than a sign of futures filled with alarm clocks, commutes and pants that actually button. The R.T.O. date is gone. It’s been replaced with “we’ll get back to you.”</p>

“The only companies being dishonest are the ones giving employees certainty,” said Nicholas Bloom, a Stanford professor who advises dozens of chief executives. “As a parent you can hide stuff from your kids, but as a C.E.O. you can’t do that to adult employees who read the news.”

Some workers have returned to their cubicles in recent months, with office occupancy across the United States rising from 33 percent in August to 40 percent this month, according to data from Kastle Systems, a building security firm. But the visions of full-scale reopenings and mandatory returns, which formed as vaccines rolled out last spring, have remained nebulous.

A late August survey of 238 executives, conducted by Gartner, found that two-thirds of organizations had delayed their return to office plans because of news about coronavirus variants. Apple, Ford, CNN and Google are just a handful of the employers that announced postponements, along with Lyft, which said the earliest that workers would be required to return to the office is 2023.

Earlier this fall there had been high hopes that the first quarter 2022 office reopening dates might hold up. Cushman & Wakefield, one of the world’s biggest commercial real estate companies, released a September report projecting February 2022 as an “inflection point,” when at least 70 percent of the global population would be vaccinated or previously infected with coronavirus, making R.T.O. dates easier to stick by. But some of the firm’s projections are already being tested. Its report began by laying out the assumption that “the Delta strain represents the final wave of the pandemic.”

The pandemic hasn’t been an optimal time for assumptions of any kind. Some employers went ahead and made them anyway, trying to position themselves as bold decision makers by setting concrete R.T.O. dates. Many have since given up on that level of specificity.

“Folks have hedged appropriately this time around and they understand that it’s a dialogue with their employees, not a mandate,” said Zach Dunn, co-founder of the office space management platform Robin. “If that sounds a little kumbaya, maybe. But the reality is, folks are learning that sharing the intention of their return plan is more important than sharing the plan itself.”

In other words, it’s better to communicate ambiguity than to be wrong, according to Mr. Dunn. Executives are accustomed to projecting a sense of certainty about company policies, by necessity; it’s tough to get people to follow rules when even the leaders don’t believe they’re enforceable. The bumpy road to office reopenings, though, has tested that ethos of confident, rigid management.

“The average C.E.O. has very little command over the state and progress of a global pandemic,” Mr. Dunn continued. “It feels like in a moment of crisis they should be showing leadership by sharing a clear vision for what they expect, but that’s backfired for most folks.”

Julia Anas, chief people officer at Qualtrics, a Utah-based software company, is one of the executives who has soured on hard-and-fast R.T.O. timelines. In August, as her team’s optimism about the state of the virus tempered, Qualtrics delayed its plans for a September return to office indefinitely, promising to give its nearly 5,000 employees at least 30 days’ notice before they’d have to report to their desks.

“We decided as a leadership team, ‘what was magical about these dates?’” Ms. Anas said. “It was extremely liberating saying, ‘We’re going to see how this nets out and we’re not solving for a date.’”

She is unsettled by the possibility that they will still be working from home in March, two years since they first packed up their desks. But with coronavirus infections spiking, Ms. Anas is relieved that the company doesn’t have to weigh the merits of an early 2022 return, leaving workers to wait worriedly for updates.

“If we had kicked the can to January, they’d be fixated on that,” she said. “We keep focused on the work. This is just a distraction.”

For many organizational leaders, addressing the anxieties of their work force has been the only constant in the R.T.O. process.

With the spread of Delta, Jessica Saranich, who runs U.S. operations at the productivity software company Monday.com, got a flurry of notes from colleagues: Will we really go back to the office in August? Last month brought the news of Omicron, with a fresh set of questions: What does this mean for the January off-site gathering, with its promise of free food, partying and a Miami D.J.? Ms. Saranich's team has delayed its return to office date three times, which has left some employees pleading for more permanence in the company's policies.

"Sometimes our team will say please just make a decision, pick something, make us come back to the office or make us be remote," Ms. Saranich said. "But it's not something that we want to rush. To be able to lean into the discomfort and say we don't know is a great gift that we can give to our team."

Still, plenty of organizations aiming for an early 2022 return haven't budged.

Express Employment Professionals, a staffing provider in Oklahoma City, aims to bring half of its 300 workers back to their newly remodeled headquarters on Jan. 15. The company had originally reopened its office in July in a phased re-entry plan, which was temporarily scaled back in September. Keith McFall, chief operating officer, feels that clear R.T.O. dates serve as a force of stability for workers navigating months of tumult.

"We've learned that it's best for our employees to have some certainty in their lives and an expectation of when they may have to transition from home to work," he said, "always with the qualifier that we'd let them know 30 days before that date whether we'll remain with that date or defer it again."

Mr. McFall has been optimistic about Express's plan for an early 2022 return. But like other executives eager to see their employees in person, he acknowledged that the news about Omicron, which is a possibly more transmissible variant, brought with it a jolt of fresh doubt.

"I probably can't say the words I said to myself when I first heard about it," said Marina González, head of talent management at the Atlanta company Payrix, which is hoping for an early 2022 return to the office, though they have not set a date for it. "Just when you think you've got it all figured out, something else comes along."

The uncertainty of this period has prompted some companies to abandon more than just their R.T.O. dates.

Charity: water, a nonprofit, had previously occupied 25,000 square feet in Tribeca and reopened a downsized office last spring. Scott Harrison, the organization's chief executive, who had moved from New York City to Nashville during the pandemic, sensed that his employees wanted him to set clear expectations about when they would have to report back.

"We saw a lot of companies playing it month by month and we wanted to give our team members a much greater line of sight," he said.

But that line of sight doesn't include an R.T.O. date. Workers weren't making use of the office space, Mr. Harrison found. So instead of locking down a timeline for the company's return, he picked a date of a different kind: By March 2022, Charity: water will end its lease.

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HEADLINE	12/10 Covid crisis threatens holidays again
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.msn.com/en-us/money/companies/covid-hospital-admissions-jump-in-u-s-led-by-northeast-states/ar-AAREQTC">https://www.msn.com/en-us/money/companies/covid-hospital-admissions-jump-in-u-s-led-by-northeast-states/ar-AAREQTC</a>
GIST	(Bloomberg) -- After months of warnings that vaccinations would ward off a Covid-19 disaster, the U.S. is sailing toward a holiday crisis.

Cases and hospital admissions are rising amid a season of family gatherings. Most victims have shunned inoculations. The situation is especially dire in the chilly Northeastern states, but doctors in many places report a grimly repetitive cycle of admission, intensive care and death. There are shortages of beds and staff to care for the suffering.

“We’re in desperate shape,” said Brian Weis, chief medical officer at Northwest Texas Healthcare System in Amarillo, the state’s worst hot spot.

In 12 states and the nation’s capital, the seven-day average of admissions with confirmed Covid-19 has climbed at least 50% from two weeks earlier, according to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services data. The areas with the largest percentage upticks were Connecticut, New Jersey, Washington, D.C., Vermont and Rhode Island.

A little more than 60% of the U.S. population is considered fully vaccinated, generally meaning two shots, according to U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data. That still leaves a large pool of highly susceptible people capable of pressuring hospitals.

In the most recent CDC data, from September, unvaccinated people had about 14 times the risk of dying from Covid-19 after adjusting for age -- a major factor in Covid outcomes.

In some states in the Midwest and Northeast, Covid hospitalizations are mirroring last year’s seasonal pattern, said Pinar Karaca-Mandic, one of the leaders of the [Covid-19 Hospitalization Tracking Project](#) at the University of Minnesota.

“The winter coming, people are being more indoors,” she said. During last year’s surge, “everyone was unvaccinated,” Karaca-Mandic said. While most Americans are inoculated now, they’re also isolating less than last year.

### **Shots All Around**

Officials continue to push shots. In Boston, Mayor Michelle Wu sent out news of getting her own booster at City Hall on Thursday. The city is adding vaccination clinics, including at schools, and colleges around the region have begun to let students know boosters will be required. New Hampshire will hold a “Booster Blitz” Friday at sites across the state.

But Karaca-Mandic said the wild card is the new variant: “We just don’t know what will happen with omicron.”

As the world has turned its focus to the strain, which spreads fast but may be no more deadly, cases caused by the delta variant have continued to mount in the U.S. The waves emerged and recede at different times in different regions, and recent hot spots such as Montana and Colorado are now seeing improvement.

Still, Colorado had just 518 acute-care beds available Thursday, said Scott Bookman, the state’s Covid incident commander. “We have a long way to go before our hospitals empty out,” he said in a news briefing.

Even in places coping well, a sense of foreboding prevails. California has seen relatively steady infection rates in recent weeks, with hospitalizations around the levels they were in July, before delta took hold. But the most populous state had 11 confirmed omicron cases as of Wednesday, which “presumes we’ll see dozens more in the next days, hundreds more in the next weeks, thousands more” after that, Governor Gavin Newsom said on ABC television.

In Amarillo, elective surgeries have been canceled and emergency rooms are jammed with virus patients who must wait as long as five days for a hospital bed, Weis said in a phone interview. Regional hospital officials have petitioned the state for additional staff “but there’s little hope they can come through,” he said.

In Connecticut, which has one of the highest vaccination rates in the U.S., 576 people were hospitalized with Covid-19 as of Dec. 8; of these, 77% were not vaccinated, state data show.

New Jersey's average daily hospital admissions reached a seven-day average of 206, up 78% from two weeks earlier. Even so, at this time a year ago, the pace of admissions was well over twice as fast.

"The overwhelming majority of our new cases, new hospitalizations and new deaths, sadly, are from among the unvaccinated," Governor Phil Murphy said during a Dec. 8 briefing.

Geisinger Health System, which has nine hospitals in northeastern and central Pennsylvania, is over capacity and turning away patients, said Gerald Maloney, chief medical officer for hospital services.

"People are tired," Maloney said in an interview. "It's worse already than it was a year ago, and it may get even worse."

In New York, Governor Kathy Hochul ordered more than 30 hospitals that were filling up with patients to halt some procedures. Mayor Bill de Blasio said that was a grim harbinger for New York City.

"Biggest city in America, densely populated, we cannot let that happen here," he said.

### **Worn Out**

In Michigan, hospitals are hitting a critical point. The state's 22,883 inpatient beds are more than 85% occupied, said John Karasinski, spokesman for the Michigan Health and Hospital Association.

"The situation is dire and compounded by several factors," Karasinski said in a phone interview. "The Covid-19 surge is stressing hospitals, their workforce and capacity. There are ongoing staffing shortages. It existed before the pandemic and has gotten worse during the pandemic."

The Department of Defense sent three teams of 22 medical professionals to help, each in a different part of the state.

Illinois had 3,178 Covid-hospitalizations as of Wednesday, the highest since January, according to the state health department. Six of the state's 11 regions had 20 or fewer intensive-care beds available.

Thanksgiving weekend is a likely driver of the rebound, said Arien Herrmann, hospital coordinating-center manager for the state's southernmost counties.

"People traveling, visiting friends and family, having gatherings created an opportunity for community spread," Herrmann said in a telephone interview. "It'll be the same thing going into Christmas and then New Year's. This is keeping me up at night."

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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Crypto rich moving to Puerto Rico</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-12-11/crypto-rich-are-moving-to-puerto-rico-world-s-new-luxury-tax-haven">https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-12-11/crypto-rich-are-moving-to-puerto-rico-world-s-new-luxury-tax-haven</a>
GIST	<p>The St. Regis Bahia Beach Resort in Puerto Rico boasts a golf course and oceanfront residences in a 483-acre nature reserve, set along azure waters and lush rainforest. But what's perhaps most appealing to those who are now rushing to this property is the section on its website explaining tax benefits for island residents.</p> <p>That was the case for Anthony Emtman, who left Los Angeles behind and bought a condo at the resort in March. The chief executive officer of Ikigai Asset Management is now a part of a burgeoning crypto community along Puerto Rico's north shore, where the tropical weather is just a bonus.</p>

Emtman and his crypto peers are taking a page out of [hedge funds' books](#) and seeking residence on the island to reap huge tax savings. High-earning investors in the U.S. pay up to 20% in capital gains tax and as much as 37% on short-term gains. In Puerto Rico, they pay nothing. And companies based on the American mainland pay 21% in federal corporate tax plus an individual state tax, compared to just 4% on the island. That makes the move a no-brainer for some investors, especially as the crypto market's [meteoric growth](#) continues and Democrats push for [higher taxes](#) on the rich.

The presence of digital currency enthusiasts is already palpable on the small island, where chance encounters and networking opportunities abound: Run-ins at taco stands; spontaneous drinks and dinner at luxury condos; "Crypto Mondays" gatherings at hotels and restaurants across San Juan.

Crypto funds Pantera Capital and Redwood City Ventures are among those that have established offices on the island. Facebook product manager-turned-whistleblower Frances Haugen recently [told](#) the New York Times she's living in Puerto Rico in part to be with her "crypto friends." New York City's mayor-elect, Eric Adams, even flew there in November with crypto-billionaire [Brock Pierce](#) for dinner with Puerto Rico's Governor Pedro Pierluisi.

Now, "it's not just, 'Move to Puerto Rico to save tax,'" said Giovanni Mendez, a corporate and tax attorney advising those who relocate. "It's, 'Move to Puerto Rico because everybody is there.'"

The Puerto Rican government created the tax breaks in 2012 with the hopes of infusing the island's struggling economy with cash and diversifying its job pool. Hedge funds gradually began seeking a toehold on the island, but what's really supercharged the flurry of arrivals is the pandemic — which drove a shift away from big cities and popularized remote work — and the recent explosion in crypto markets.

Proponents of the tax breaks describe it as not only a boost for an island that's been mired in bankruptcy for more than four years — prolonged by [hurricanes](#), [earthquakes](#), a [political scandal](#) and the pandemic — but an opportunity for reinvention. Still, the idea has its detractors: Some of the laws only apply to new residents, so lifelong islanders are ineligible. It's made some hesitant to welcome the new crop of wealthy denizens, fearful that the flow of income will exacerbate inequality and create social tension. As is, real estate prices are already rocketing to "absurd" levels.

During the last big crypto [bull run](#) in 2017, many investors tried to move to Puerto Rico before the market peaked and then collapsed, said Mendez. So far this year, Puerto Rico has received more than 1,200 applications — a record — through its Individual Investors Act, which exempts new residents from paying taxes on capital gains, according to the island's Department of Economic Development and Commerce. The number of U.S. mainlanders seeking Puerto Rico's tax breaks has tripled this year.

Another 274 corporations, LLCs, partnerships and other entities were approved for the Exports Services Act, which provides a 4% corporate tax rate and a 100% exemption on dividends. Both fall under Puerto Rico's Act 60, a group of tax breaks that were packaged together in 2019 to attract investment not just from crypto, but finance, tech and other industries.

The island even kicked off its first Puerto Rico Blockchain Week on Dec. 6. On the first day of the conference, Puerto Rico House Speaker Rafael "Tatito" Hernandez announced that the legislature would look into using blockchain technology to [reduce](#) government graft.

Eventually, "Puerto Rico will be recognized as a blockchain capital," said Michael Terpin, the founder of BitAngels, who relocated to the island from Las Vegas in 2016. He says he's referred to as the "messiah" in crypto circles for evangelizing the island's tax benefits and new business community.

### **Paradise Living**

The crypto crowd has primarily gravitated to three areas along the coast.

There are the secluded escapes, like Bahia, which sits 26 miles east of San Juan, and the Ritz-Carlton-branded Dorado Beach resort, about 23 miles to the west of the capital. Those seeking a more urban



lifestyle have opted for Condado, a high-end neighborhood and shopping district in San Juan, where condo and hotel towers line the oceanfront.

“There’s restaurants and there’s coffee shops and there’s a mall,” said Brent Johnson, the CEO of wealth management firm Santiago Capital, who moved from San Francisco to Condado in May. “It’s kind of like a mini Miami.”

During his time in Puerto Rico, Johnson has been able to connect with wealth management, private equity and crypto firms, as well as people in the real estate, pharmaceutical, energy and agricultural sectors.

“I felt like I could come here, do my job, and still be plugged into the financial community, much more so than going to somewhere like Hawaii or Mexico,” he said.

As for life in Bahia, “it’s like living in a rainforest,” said Ikigai’s Emtman. Except in this rainforest you can play tennis, basketball, golf, lift weights in the gym or go kayaking. When the sun goes down, the sports are swapped out for drinks.

“The welcoming nature and the friendliness and the inclusiveness of people means you end up over at someone’s place for a meal or a couple drinks,” he said.

That was the case for Brent James, a crypto investor who moved to Puerto Rico in 2018 from Atlanta.

About two months ago, he was eating tacos with a friend in Condado when he spotted Johnson biking. James recognized Johnson from his popular Twitter account.

“I shout out his name and he comes over and we started a conversation and became friends,” James said. Johnson invited him to a small gathering, which led to conversations about new projects and business opportunities.

“There’s a hunger for knowledge and opportunity on the island,” James said.

### **Property Boom**

The influx of newcomers is causing waves in the real estate market, particularly in the resort communities.

Dorado has seen the most growth, with prices almost tripling, according to Priscilla Ferrer, a Puerto Rican broker and appraiser.

“It’s absurd,” she said. “These luxury properties are getting bought for an emotional rate and not an economic rate.”

Francisco Diaz Fournier, founding partner of Luxury Collection Real Estate, said it’s now common to see properties sell for more than \$20 million.

“Right now we are selling a home in Dorado Beach for \$27 million, and another one is going for \$29 million,” he said.

In Bahia, prices per square foot have almost doubled, according to Blanca Lopez, founder of Gramercy Real Estate Group and daughter-in-law of Governor Pierluisi.

“We are seeing prices north of \$3,000 per square foot,” she said, while high-end home values in Condado are around \$1,400 to \$1,500 per square foot, a roughly 35% increase from a year ago.

And there isn’t enough inventory to satiate demand, as buyers are flocking to the island faster than high-end homes can be built.

“We don’t have room, at least not in Dorado, Bahia or Condado,” said Diaz Fournier. “The market is spreading out, so we’re seeing spillovers in areas of San Juan where people wouldn’t look before.”

As wealthier people gain ground elsewhere, it hurts housing and job prospects for islanders, said Raul Santiago-Bartolomei, an assistant professor at the University of Puerto Rico’s graduate school of planning.

“It’s making these places more unattainable for a workforce and low-income households that actually need to be living near these high opportunity areas,” he said.

There are several new residential towers rising in Condado, but that won’t be enough to keep pace. Diaz Fournier said there’s even a labor shortage, so Puerto Rico is working with the U.S. Department of State to secure visas to bring “people from the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Haiti and South America because we don’t have the people to build.”

For him, the newcomers are welcome, after more than 500,000 residents left the island over the last two decades.

“This is really exciting,” he said. “These are the best years of Puerto Rico.”

### **‘One Puerto Rico’**

So far, the incentives appear to be creating jobs.

From 2015 to 2019, the Individual Investors Act added around 4,400 jobs and the Export Services Act added 36,222, according to a study by Puerto Rican consulting firm Estudios Tecnicos. Call centers accounted for most of the jobs, followed by consulting services, advertising, public relations and tax and accounting services.

As long as the jobs are coming, the “doors are open” for the crypto community, said Carlos Fontan, director of incentives at the Department of Economic Development and Commerce.

The tax breaks are doing what they were intended to, said Alberto Baco-Bague, the department’s former secretary and a driving force behind Act 60.

In 2017, he created the Partnership for Modern Puerto Rico, an economic development think tank that connects local business leaders with incoming Act 60 members. John Paulson’s investment management firm, advisory services firm Grant Thornton and tech company Evertec are among its 100 members, whose total assets under management surpass \$50 billion, according to Baco-Bague.

“Ideally we want to be building one Puerto Rico,” he said. “Not one Puerto Rico for new residents and another one for local business leaders.”

Still, one of the biggest challenges is convincing the local population of the program’s economic benefits. The Individual Investors Act, also known as Act 22, only applies to non-Puerto Ricans, meaning islanders are ineligible. And even though the Export Services Act is available to locals, many assume otherwise because the tax break is often marketed alongside programs for foreigners.

“There is certainly a cry for a more just taxation system in Puerto Rico,” said Caroline Lopez, a tax attorney who has been working with incentives since 2011. “Puerto Ricans are always wondering, ‘does it make sense that I’m paying all these taxes and a lot of people under Act 22 don’t?’”

During a visit to San Juan this month, Nobel-prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz said the tax breaks were not an effective economic development tool.

“The people coming under Act 22 are not adding that much to the Puerto Rican economy,” he told a conference hosted by the Center for a New Economy. “They are spending a little, but very little, and at the

same time they're raising real estate prices and the cost of living for others. They are, what we economists call, a negative externality."

Puerto Rico isn't the first to try and attract crypto investment, and it certainly won't be the last. The economy of El Zonte, a surf town on El Salvador's Pacific coast surf town, runs on Bitcoin. El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele was a proponent of crypto long before taking office in 2019. This year, the country adopted Bitcoin as its national currency, and announced plans for the first-ever sovereign Bitcoin bonds and a tax-free Bitcoin City. Portugal, too, isn't taxing the buying or selling of cryptocurrencies, unless it's an individual's main source of income.

Juan Carlos Pedreira, a Puerto Rican crypto entrepreneur, says the growing interest, particularly among young islanders, provides a unique opportunity.

If it's not taken seriously, "we are going to miss the chance to reinvent the island."

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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Tired nation: 3-in-5 more tired than ever</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.studyfinds.org/exhausted-nation-pandemic-tired-energy/">https://www.studyfinds.org/exhausted-nation-pandemic-tired-energy/</a>
GIST	<p>NEW YORK — Three in five Americans feel more tired now than they've ever been in their lives. In a study of 2,000 respondents, 59 percent say that spending so much time at home since early 2020 has permanently sapped them of their energy.</p> <p>Fifty-eight percent confess to feeling disjointed and unfocused, and catching a few moments of sleep doesn't appear to be a viable solution. Over half the poll (55%) think no amount of rest can help them feel focused during the day.</p> <p>exhausted pandemicThe survey, conducted by OnePoll on behalf of Monster Energy, found the most common energy-depleting activity to be poor sleep scheduling, according to 56 percent of respondents.</p> <p>One in two people also blamed long work hours (53%) or staying inside too much (52%) during lockdowns as the reason for their perpetual exhaustion. Forty-six percent add their exhaustion is due to too much screen time, while 41 percent blame the lack of routine in their lives during the worst of the pandemic.</p> <p>According to the one in three respondents working from home (34%), many of the activities they used to keep their energy levels up are no longer possible. Nearly seven in ten (69%) even claim that working from home has messed with their sleep schedule.</p> <p><b>Energy needed</b></p> <p>When respondents begin to feel that dreaded energy dip — usually around 1:04 pm — 64 percent will reach for drinks that contain caffeine to give them a boost in focus and productivity.</p> <p>"Working from home has become the 'new normal' for many of us," says a spokesperson for Monster Energy in a statement. "It seems like just about everyone we talk to is feeling a little tired and unfocused while they've been working from home."</p> <p>Video conferences have also contributed to the global energy drain, as three in five respondents find them to be even more exhausting than in-person meetings. Many also seem to miss the energy boost from physically being in the office. Nearly half the poll (49%) believes spontaneous conversations with co-workers really help to keep them upbeat and alert.</p> <p>Results from a supporting survey of 2,005 Americans showed that while many respondents credit caffeine with being an energy booster, fewer know about the positive effects of taurine.</p>

Only 37 percent identified taurine as a key ingredient in energy drinks, compared to 81 percent who said the same about caffeine. Another 35 percent thought that the natural ingredient is actually synthetically produced, while a third admitted they know nothing about taurine at all. However, only 14 percent correctly identified it as an amino acid, with 35 percent incorrectly listing it as a stimulant instead.

“According to this study, 47 percent of consumers say they think that caffeine gives them an ‘energy boost,’” the spokesperson for Monster Energy continues. “When you start to feel sluggish, reaching for something caffeinated can be the best way to get back to feeling productive.”

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HEADLINE	12/12 Russia closer to war: missiles at border
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/12/russia-closer-to-war-ukraine-border-putin-buk-missiles">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/12/russia-closer-to-war-ukraine-border-putin-buk-missiles</a>
GIST	<p>A flatbed rail wagon speeding through south-west Russia last week carried an ill omen for negotiations to avert a larger war with <a href="#">Ukraine</a>.</p> <p>On board was a Buk-M1, the kind of medium-range surface-to-air missile system that became notorious in 2014 after a missile fired from territory controlled by Russian proxies in eastern Ukraine <a href="#">shot down a Malaysian airliner</a>, killing all 298 people aboard.</p> <p>If Russia goes to war in <a href="#">Ukraine</a>, it still needs to take a number of steps: establishing fuel supply lines, opening field hospitals and deploying air-defence systems such as the Buk that would protect its heavy weaponry and troops near the front.</p> <p>Even as Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin were <a href="#">sitting down to talks</a> meant to end the crisis, Russia was inching closer to being ready to launch a full-scale ground invasion of its neighbour.</p> <p>“These data allow us to conclude that despite the negotiations between Biden and Putin, the concentration of Russian troops in the areas bordering the territory controlled by the Ukrainian authorities continues,” wrote the Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT) – an online research group that has used social media, railway schedules and other data to reveal details of Russia’s military buildup on the border.</p> <p>Putin may still decide not to launch an invasion, as he leaves troops near the front as leverage for negotiations. But Russian and western analysts are predicting that this military buildup – the second one this year – portends a series of future crises over Ukraine as Putin seeks to reverse its trajectory towards the west.</p> <p>“Even if Putin gets something from the west, serious talks or discussions about guarantees – will that be enough for Putin?” said Tatiana Stanovaya, founder of the political analysis firm R.Politik. “We are witnessing the dawn of a new geopolitical adventurism from Russia.”</p> <p>Despite the Putin-Biden talks, the crisis is growing deeper.</p> <p>On Thursday, Russia’s FSB said it had intercepted a Ukrainian ship in the Sea of Azov near Crimea for failing to obey orders. A day later, Russia closed nearly 70% of the Sea of Azov, a shared body of water also used by Ukraine, for firing drills. Then there is the escalating rhetoric.</p> <p>Deputy foreign minister Sergei Ryabkov has said Russia and the US may be hurtling towards a repeat of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. And Putin said that the situation in eastern Ukraine “looked like genocide” in a recent meeting, raising fears he could seek a pretext to send his troops into the country.</p> <p>With its military threat on the table, Russia’s foreign ministry released its list of demands for how to end the crisis on Friday. Chief among them was for Nato to “officially disavow the decision of the 2008 Bucharest Nato summit that ‘Ukraine and Georgia will become Nato members’”.</p>

Putin has spent the last two decades trying to fight Nato expansion, but the possible accession of Ukraine into the military alliance has always touched deeper emotions, and in part motivated him to order the annexation of Crimea and provoke a war in eastern Ukraine that has killed more than 14,000 people.

“I told them: please don’t touch Ukraine or there’s going to be a problem,” said Fyodor Lukyanov, an influential Russian foreign policy analyst, of his discussions with western colleagues about Nato’s enlargement in the 2000s. “There is a real red line. Right or wrong ... this kind of engagement with Ukraine on security and military affairs – that is seen here as absolutely unacceptable.”

Lukyanov said Putin saw it as his “duty as president” not to leave the “Ukrainian problem” – meaning its trajectory towards the west – for the next Russian leader.

The US has sought to persuade Russia that Ukraine would not join the alliance any time soon, but on Friday Moscow demanded a more formal declaration. That was a non-starter, Nato head Jens Stoltenberg said within hours of the demand being made public. “Nato’s relationship with Ukraine is going to be decided by the 30 Nato allies and Ukraine – no one else,” he said during a press conference with Germany’s new chancellor, Olaf Scholz.

In Ukraine, support for joining Nato has jumped considerably in recent years as the country has sought protection from an increasingly aggressive Russia. And for the nations on Nato’s eastern flank, allowing Russia to dictate the alliance’s policy on Ukraine is seen as the first step down a slippery slope towards recognising a Russian sphere of influence.

“History shows that pledges of neutrality by Ukraine or any other country in the region do nothing to abate Putin’s appetite; rather, they feed it,” wrote Ukraine’s foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, in [an article published by Foreign Affairs](#) on Friday. “The best way to respond to such ultimatums is to ignore them altogether.”

There are doubts whether Russia really wants to strike any deal at all. Analysts noted that despite Moscow building up its forces for months, Russian diplomats had not prepared any formal documents or even formulated the country’s demands until last week. And the idea of mustering nearly 100,000 troops within striking distance of the Ukrainian border (the US has said that Russia could increase that number to 175,000 by the end of January) just to hold talks with Biden has struck western observers as overkill.

That brings us back to the Buk, which, as CIT noted, had its numbers crudely painted over in an effort to prevent identification. Russia employed similar tactics during its clandestine invasion of Ukraine in 2014.

The clock is ticking. Putin could pull back, but it would be embarrassing to do so without a solid win in hand. And Russia’s demands look impossible to fulfil for the west: “Putin thinks that if Biden wants, he can move mountains, he can convince allies and convince Kyiv [to make concessions],” said Stanovaya.

“This problem could lead Putin to demand the impossible and push the stakes so high that everything ends in war.”

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HEADLINE	12/11 UK scientists urge tougher restrictions
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-science-business-lifestyle-health-97bf16e1973f8352b09be8200fea9bf7">https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-science-business-lifestyle-health-97bf16e1973f8352b09be8200fea9bf7</a>
GIST	<p>LONDON (AP) — The British government may need to introduce tougher restrictions to slow the growth of the omicron variant and prevent a new surge in COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths, British scientists said Saturday.</p> <p>U.K. health officials say omicron is spreading much more quickly than the delta strain and is likely to replace it and become the dominant variant in Britain within days. The U.K. recorded 58,194 coronavirus</p>

cases on Friday, the highest number since January, though what portion were the omicron variant is unclear.

Concerns about the new variant led Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government to reintroduce restrictions that were lifted almost six months ago. Masks must be worn in most indoor settings, vaccine certificates must be shown to enter nightclubs and people are being urged to work from home if possible.

Many scientists say that's unlikely to be enough.

Modeling released Saturday by scientists at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine suggested omicron is likely to cause a large wave of infections by January, and could cause between 25,000 and 75,000 deaths in England in the next five months if no other measures are taken.

The most pessimistic scenario foresees half a million people hospitalized with the virus by the end of April and says daily hospital admissions could be double the previous peak in January 2021. The study by the scientists, who help advise the British government, has not been peer reviewed.

The number of infections will depend on how much the variant escapes protection from vaccines, and how effective booster shots are at bolstering immunity, both of which remain unclear.

Scientists in South Africa, where omicron was first identified, say they see [signs it may cause less severe disease](#) than delta, but caution that it is too soon to be certain.

"In our most optimistic scenario, the impact of omicron in the early part of 2022 would be reduced with mild control measures such as working from home," said Rosanna Barnard of the school's Center for the Mathematical Modelling of Infectious Diseases. "However, our most pessimistic scenario suggests that we may have to endure more stringent restrictions to ensure the (health service) is not overwhelmed."

Johnson's government says it is not considering tougher measures, but aims to offer everyone 18 and over a booster shot of vaccine by the end of January.

The U.K. Health Security Agency said Friday that both the AstraZeneca and Pfizer vaccines appear [less effective in preventing symptomatic infections](#) in people exposed to omicron, though preliminary data show that effectiveness appears to rise to between 70% and 75% after a third vaccine dose.

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HEADLINE	12/12 New Caledonia voters reject independence
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-boycotts-paris-storms-bcdf16be51e3bd94e0f332c405c2da8e">https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-boycotts-paris-storms-bcdf16be51e3bd94e0f332c405c2da8e</a>
GIST	<p>NOUMEA, New Caledonia (AP) — Voters in the French island territory of New Caledonia chose overwhelmingly Sunday to stay part of France, in a referendum boycotted by pro-independence forces and closely watched around the South Pacific.</p> <p>Separatist activists had urged a delay in the vote because of the pandemic, and were angry over what they said were French government efforts to sway the campaign. So they called on their supporters to stay away from voting stations.</p> <p>And they did. With three-quarters of the vote counted, 91% of those who took part chose to stay in France, according to regional officials. Overall turnout was just 41% — less than half the numbers who showed up in a previous independence referendum last year, where support for breaking away was 46.7%.</p> <p>Keeping New Caledonia is important for French geopolitical ambitions in Indo-Pacific, and French President Emmanuel Macron was scheduled to give a national address later Sunday.</p>



The vote was monitored by the U.N. and regional powers, amid global efforts toward decolonization and amid growing Chinese influence in the region. New Caledonia, colonized by Napoleon's nephew in the 19th century, is a vast archipelago of about 270,000 people east of Australia that is 10 time zones ahead of Paris — and hosts a French military base.

Sunday's vote was the third and last in a decades-long decolonization process that stemmed from violence in 1988, which led to the French government handing New Caledonia broad autonomy under the Noumea Agreement. The process was aimed at settling tensions between native Kanaks seeking independence and those who want the territory to remain part of France.

The process does not end with the last referendum. The state, separatists and non-separatists now have 18 months to negotiate a new status for the territory and its institutions within France.

A tropical storm warning also dampened enthusiasm for the vote. Lines snaked out of some polling stations, as winds whipped palm trees lining the streets of the regional capital Noumea. But turnout at others was barely a trickle.

The question put to people in the archipelago's 307 voting stations was: "Do you want New Caledonia to gain full sovereignty and become independent?" Masks and social distancing measures were required.

The campaign and voting day were unusually calm because of the boycott call.

"There are a lot less people" than during previous referendums, said Laura Vendegou, assessor at a polling station welcoming New Caledonians from the Loyalty Islands. "The opening was very calm."

But at the Noumea city hall, voters showed up at 6:30 a.m. to line up to vote.

In the first such referendum in 2018, 43.6% of voters supported independence, and 46.7% favored it in a second vote held in 2020. While support for a "yes" vote seemed to be growing, the region's first coronavirus outbreak in September threw the political debate into disarray. Until then, New Caledonia had been one of the few virus-free places left on the planet.

By November, the archipelago had reported 271 COVID-19 deaths, and the regional Senate decreed a year of traditional Kanak mourning. Independence activists felt they couldn't campaign out of respect for their dead, and demanded that the referendum be postponed.

But pro-France groups insisted the vote should take place as scheduled to end uncertainty over New Caledonia's future and to boost its economic prospects. Pro-independence activists announced they would refuse to take part, accusing the government in Paris of imposing the referendum date and violating neutrality by publishing a document seen as casting the consequences of independence in a negative light.

France is trying to cement its presence in the Indo-Pacific region after it lost a multibillion-dollar submarine contract because of a partnership Australia formed with the United States and the U.K. The secretly negotiated submarine project, announced in September and aimed at countering Chinese ambitions in the region, was a huge blow to France. New Caledonia hosts one of two French military bases in the Pacific.

The U.N. has supported New Caledonia's decolonization process and sent electoral observers to monitor Sunday's vote. The Pacific Islands Forum also sent a delegation to observe the vote.

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HEADLINE	12/11 South Africa: omicron milder than delta
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-africa-south-africa-southern-africa-bd7a30e490c407b8d84afef5ac9e203e">https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-africa-south-africa-southern-africa-bd7a30e490c407b8d84afef5ac9e203e</a>

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — As the omicron variant sweeps through South Africa, Dr. Unben Pillay is seeing dozens of sick patients a day. Yet he hasn't had to send anyone to the hospital.

That's one of the reasons why he, along with other doctors and medical experts, suspect that the omicron version really is causing milder COVID-19 than delta, even if it seems to be spreading faster.

"They are able to manage the disease at home," Pillay said of his patients. "Most have recovered within the 10 to 14-day isolation period." said Pillay.

And that includes older patients and those with health problems that can make them more vulnerable to becoming severely ill from a coronavirus infection, he said.

In the two weeks since omicron first was reported in Southern Africa, other doctors have shared similar stories. All caution that it will take many more weeks to collect enough data to be sure, their observations and the early evidence offer some clues.

According to South Africa's National Institute for Communicable Diseases:

— Only about 30% of those hospitalized with COVID-19 in recent weeks have been seriously ill, less than half the rate as during the first weeks of previous pandemic waves.

— Average hospital stays for COVID-19 have been shorter this time - about 2.8 days compared to eight days.

— Just 3% of patients hospitalized recently with COVID-19 have died, versus about 20% in the country's earlier outbreaks.

"At the moment, virtually everything points toward it being milder disease," Willem Hanekom, director of the Africa Health Research Institute, said, citing the national institute's figures and other reports. "It's early days, and we need to get the final data. Often hospitalizations and deaths happen later, and we are only two weeks into this wave."

In the meantime, scientists around the world are watching case counts and hospitalization rates, while testing to see how well current vaccines and treatments hold up. While delta is still the dominant coronavirus strain worldwide, omicron cases are popping up in dozens of countries, with South Africa the epicenter.

Pillay practices in the country's Gauteng province, where the omicron version has taken hold. With 16 million residents, It's South Africa's most populous province and includes the largest city, Johannesburg, and the capital, Pretoria. Gauteng saw a 400% rise in new cases in the first week of December, and testing shows omicron is responsible for more than 90% of them, according to health officials.

Pillay says his COVID-19 patients during the last delta wave "had trouble breathing and lower oxygen levels. Many needed hospitalization within days," he said. The patients he's treating now have milder, flu-like symptoms, such as body aches and a cough, he said.

Pillay is a director of an association representing some 5,000 general practitioners across South Africa, and his colleagues have documented similar observations about omicron. Netcare, the largest private healthcare provider, is also reporting less severe cases of COVID-19.

But the number of cases is climbing. South Africa confirmed 22,400 new cases on Thursday and 19,000 on Friday, up from about 200 per day a few weeks ago. The new surge has infected 90,000 people in the past month, Minister of Health Joe Phaahla said Friday.

"Omicron has driven the resurgence," Phaahla said, citing studies that say 70% of the new cases nationwide are from omicron.

	<p>The coronavirus reproduction rate in the current wave - indicating the number of people likely to be infected by one person — is 2.5, the highest that South Africa has recorded during the pandemic, he said.</p> <p>“Because this is such a transmissible variant, we’re seeing increases like we never saw before,” said Waasila Jassat, who tracks hospital data for the National Institute for Communicable Diseases.</p> <p>Of the patients hospitalized in the current wave, 86% weren’t vaccinated against the coronavirus, Jassat said. The COVID-patients in South Africa’s hospitals now also are younger than at other periods of the pandemic: about two-thirds are under 40.</p> <p>Jassat said that even though the early signs are that omicron cases are less severe, the volume of new COVID-19 cases may still overwhelm South Africa’s hospitals and result in a higher number of severe symptoms and deaths.</p> <p>“That is the danger always with the waves,” she said.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/12 Monster tornado rips across middle of US</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/tornadoes-kentucky-illinois-arkansas-severe-weather-67b9acfb9d83e2e7139ae9de01618a21">https://apnews.com/article/tornadoes-kentucky-illinois-arkansas-severe-weather-67b9acfb9d83e2e7139ae9de01618a21</a>
GIST	<p>MAYFIELD, Ky. (AP) — A monstrous tornado, carving a track that could rival the longest on record, ripped across the middle of the U.S. in a stormfront that killed dozens and tore apart a candle factory, crushed a nursing home, derailed a train and smashed an Amazon warehouse.</p> <p>“I pray that there will be another rescue. I pray that there will be another one or two,” Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear said, as crews sifted through the wreckage of the candle factory in Mayfield, where 110 people were working overnight Friday when the storm hit. Forty of them were rescued.</p> <p>“We had to, at times, crawl over casualties to get to live victims,” said Jeremy Creason, the city’s fire chief and EMS director.</p> <p>In Kentucky alone, 22 were confirmed dead by Saturday afternoon, including 11 in and around Bowling Green. But Beshear said upwards of 70 may have been killed when a twister touched down for more than 200 miles (320 kilometers) in his state and that the number of deaths could eventually exceed 100 across 10 or more counties.</p> <p>The death toll of 36 across five states includes six people in Illinois, where an Amazon facility was hit; four in Tennessee; two in Arkansas, where a nursing home was destroyed; and two in Missouri.</p> <p>If early reports are confirmed, the twister “will likely go down perhaps as one of the longest track violent tornadoes in United States history,” said Victor Genzini, a researcher on extreme weather at Northern Illinois University.</p> <p>The longest tornado on record, in March 1925, tracked for about 220 miles (355 kilometers) through Missouri, Illinois and Indiana. But Genzini said this twister may have touched down for nearly 250 miles (400 kilometers). The storm was all the more remarkable because it came in December, when normally colder weather limits tornadoes, he said.</p> <p>Debris from destroyed buildings and shredded trees covered the ground in Mayfield, a city of about 10,000 in western Kentucky. Twisted metal sheeting, downed power lines and wrecked vehicles lined the streets. Windows and roofs were blown off the buildings that were still standing.</p> <p>The missing at the candle factory included Janine Denise Johnson Williams, a 50-year-old mother of four whose family members kept vigil at the site Saturday.</p>

“It’s Christmastime and she works at a place that’s making candles for gifts,” her brother, Darryl Williams, said. “To give up the gift of life to make a gift. We haven’t heard anything, and I’m not presuming anything. But I’m expecting for the worst.”

He said Johnson Williams called her husband overnight to report the weather was getting bad, the last time anyone heard from her.

Kyanna Parsons-Perez, an employee at the factory, was trapped under 5 feet (about 1.5 meters) of debris for at least two hours until rescuers managed to free her.

In an interview with NBC’s “Today,” she said it was “absolutely the most terrifying” event she had ever experienced. “I did not think I was going to make it at all.”

Just before the tornado struck, the building’s lights flickered. She felt a gust of wind, her ears started popping and then, “Boom. Everything came down on us.” People started screaming, and she heard other workers praying.

Kentucky State Trooper Sarah Burgess said rescue crews were using heavy equipment to move rubble at the candle factory. Coroners were called to the scene and bodies were recovered, but she didn’t know how many. She said it could take a day and potentially longer to remove all of the rubble.

Rescue efforts were complicated because Mayfield’s main fire station and emergency services hub were also hit by the tornado, Creason said.

After a wall at a nursing home in Mayfield collapsed, Vernon Evans said he rushed to help firefighters pull people out, only to find one resident lying dead in a few inches of water.

“All I could do is sit there and hold their head up,” he said. “I never experienced nothing like this.”

President Joe Biden approved an emergency disaster declaration for Kentucky on Saturday and pledged to support the affected states.

“I promise you, whatever is needed — whatever is needed — the federal government is going to find a way to provide it,” Biden said.

Six people were killed in the collapse of the Amazon warehouse in Edwardsville, Illinois, with another injured worker airlifted to a hospital, fire Chief James Whiteford said.

Investigators searched the rubble throughout the day for additional victims and 45 people survived, Whiteford said. Authorities were uncertain Saturday evening whether anyone was still unaccounted because workers were in the midst of a shift change when it was struck by the tornado about 8:30 p.m. Friday.

“This is a devastating tragedy for our Amazon family and our focus is on supporting our employees and partners,” Amazon spokesperson Richard Rocha said in a written statement.

The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, which has been trying to organize workers at an Amazon facility in Alabama, criticized the company for keeping the Illinois site open during a weather emergency.

Missouri Gov. Mike Parson’s office said the storms killed at least two people in the state and initial assessments indicate they destroyed or did major damage to hundreds of homes and buildings.

Workers at a National Weather Service office had to take shelter as a tornado passed near their office in Weldon Spring, Missouri, about 30 miles (48 kilometers) west of St. Louis.

	<p>“This was an incredible storm that lasted a long time and covered a lot of territory,” said Larry Vannozzi, meteorologist in charge of the National Weather Service office covering the Nashville area.</p> <p>Meteorologists haven’t determined whether the storm spawned a single tornado or multiple tornadoes, he said.</p> <p>In Arkansas, a tornado struck a nursing home in Monette, killing one and trapping 20 people inside as the building collapsed, Craighead County Judge Marvin Day told The Associated Press.</p> <p>Another person died when the storm hit a Dollar General store in nearby Leachville, Gov. Asa Hutchinson said.</p> <p>“Probably the most remarkable thing is that there’s not a greater loss of life,” Hutchinson said after touring the wreckage of the nursing home. “It is catastrophic. It’s a total destruction.”</p> <p>Gov. Bill Lee on Saturday toured tornado-torn parts of western Tennessee in which four people had been killed.</p> <p>Lee traveled to Tiptonville and then Dresden, a small town of about 3,000 that saw its downtown corridor ripped to shreds.</p> <p>“This is about the saddest thing I’ve ever seen,” said Lee, who has had three fatal tornadoes rip through the state during his first term in office. “The whole town, the whole town.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/12 G7 warns Russia of invasion consequence</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/g7-uk-warns-russia-severe-cost-ukraine-incursion-81704688">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/g7-uk-warns-russia-severe-cost-ukraine-incursion-81704688</a>
GIST	<p>LIVERPOOL, England -- British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said Sunday that “the world’s largest economies are united” in warning Russia that an invasion of Ukraine would have “massive” — though largely undisclosed — consequences.</p> <p>Russia’s military buildup near the Ukrainian border has dominated talks among foreign ministers from the Group of Seven wealthy democracies in the English city of Liverpool.</p> <p>The U.S. and its NATO and G-7 allies worry that the movement of Russian troops and weapons to the border region could be precursor to an invasion, and have vowed to inflict heavy sanctions on Russia’s economy if that happens.</p> <p>Moscow denies having any plans to attack Ukraine and accuses Kyiv of its own allegedly aggressive designs.</p> <p>Truss, who discussed the crisis with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and other G-7 diplomats, said the group was sending a “powerful signal to our adversaries and our allies.”</p> <p>“We’ve been clear that any incursion by Russia into Ukraine would have massive consequences for which there would be a severe cost,” she said at a news conference on the final day of the weekend meeting.</p> <p>Top diplomats from the G-7 nations — the U.K., the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Japan — are likely to deliver a stern warning to Moscow as part of their conclusions to the conference later Sunday. It’s less clear how much detail they will give about the measures they might take.</p> <p>When it comes to economic sanctions, Truss said the G-7 was “considering all options.”</p>

A senior U.S. official who participated in the G-7 discussions said the ministers were united in their “extreme concern” about developments on the Russia-Ukraine border and agreed on the need for strong measures that could be implemented “very, very fast” if Russia did not heed warnings to back down.

The U.S. and its allies have played down talk of a military response to defend Ukraine, with efforts focusing on tough sanctions that would hit the Russian economy, rather than just individuals.

In the U.S., reporters asked President Joe Biden on Saturday about the possibility of sending combat troops to Ukraine, and he said that idea was never considered. “Are you ready to send American troops into war and go into Ukraine to fight Russians on the battlefield?” he said.

Biden said he has made it clear to Putin that in the event of an invasion, “the economic consequences for his economy are going to be devastating. Devastating.”

China’s muscle-flexing in the Indo-Pacific region and the ailing Iran nuclear deal were also on the agenda for the weekend meeting at the dockside Museum of Liverpool.

Getting a unified response from the G-7, a group of countries with disparate interests, has often proved tough.

Germany plans on getting gas from Russia soon through the contentious Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which bypasses Ukraine. Britain, which is not dependent on Russian gas, generally takes a tougher line on the pipeline — but faces tough questions about London’s financial district and property market, both hubs for Russian money.

U.K. bank and financial authorities have long been criticized for allegedly turning a blind eye to ill-gotten gains, but Truss insisted Britain has “very strong anti-corruption and anti-money laundering rules.”

G-7 nations are also increasingly concerned about China’s growing economic and technological dominance, especially in developing countries. The G-7 has launched a “Build Back Better World” initiative to offer developing nations funding for big infrastructure projects as an alternative to money from China that, the West argues, often comes with strings attached.

Truss said the G-7 was “concerned about the coercive economic policies of China.”

“And what we want to do is build the investment, reach the economic trade reach of like-minded, freedom loving democracies,” she said. “That is why we are stepping up our investment into low- and middle-income countries.”

A unified stance towards China continues to prove elusive, however, with the U.S. and Britain generally more hawkish than other G-7 members.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 CBP unit investigated US journalists</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/11/watchdog-federal-anti-terror-unit-investigated-jou/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/11/watchdog-federal-anti-terror-unit-investigated-jou/</a>
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON (AP) — A special Customs and Border Protection unit used sensitive government databases intended to track terrorists to investigate as many as 20 U.S.-based journalists, including a Pulitzer Prize-winning Associated Press reporter, according to a federal watchdog.</p> <p>Yahoo News, which published an extensive report on the investigation, also found that the unit, the Counter Network Division, queried records of congressional staffers and perhaps members of Congress.</p> <p>Jeffrey Rambo, an agent who acknowledged running checks on journalists in 2017, told federal investigators the practice is routine. “When a name comes across your desk you run it through every</p>



system you have access too, that's just status quo, that's what everyone does," Rambo was quoted by Yahoo News as saying.

The AP obtained a redacted copy of a more than 500-page report by the Homeland Security Department's inspector general that included the same statement, but with the speaker's name blacked out. The border protection agency is part of Homeland Security.

The revelations raised alarm in news organizations and prompted a demand for a full explanation.

"We are deeply concerned about this apparent abuse of power, Lauren Easton, AP's director of media relations, said in a statement. "This appears to be an example of journalists being targeted for simply doing their jobs, which is a violation of the First Amendment."

In its own statement, Customs and Border Protection did not specifically address the investigation, but said, "CBP vetting and investigatory operations, including those conducted by the Counter Network Division, are strictly governed by well-established protocols and best practices. CBP does not investigate individuals without a legitimate and legal basis to do so."

An employee at Rambo's Storymakers Coffee Roasters, a small storefront in San Diego's Barrio Logan neighborhood, said Saturday that Rambo was not immediately available to comment. Rambo lives in San Diego.

The new disclosures are just the latest examples of federal agencies using their power to examine the contacts of journalists and others.

Earlier this year Attorney General Merrick Garland formally prohibited prosecutors from seizing the records of journalists in leak investigations, with limited exceptions, reversing years of department policy. That action came after an outcry over revelations that the Trump Justice Department had obtained records belonging to journalists, as well as Democratic members of Congress and their aides and a former White House counsel, Don McGahn.

During the Obama administration, federal investigators secretly seized phone records for some reporters and editors at the AP. Those seizures involved office and home lines as well as cellphones.

Rambo's and the unit's use of the databases was more extensive than previously known. The inspector general referred possible criminal charges for misusing government databases and lying to investigators, but the Justice Department declined to prosecute Rambo and two other Homeland Security employees.

Rambo complained to Yahoo News that Customs and Border Protection has not stood by him and that he has been unfairly portrayed in news reports.

"What none of these articles identify me as, is a law enforcement officer who was cleared of wrongdoing, who actually had a true purpose to be doing what I was doing," he said, "and CBP refuses to acknowledge that, refuses to admit that, refuses to make that wrong right."

Rambo had previously been identified as the agent who accessed the travel records of reporter Ali Watkins, then working for Politico, and questioned her about confidential sources. Watkins now writes for The New York Times.

Rambo was assigned to the border agency unit, part of the National Targeting Center in Sterling, Virginia, in 2017. He told investigators he initially approached Watkins as part of a broader effort to get reporters to write about forced labor around the world as a national security issue.

He also described similar efforts with AP reporter Martha Mendoza, according to an unredacted summary obtained by Yahoo News. Rambo's unit "was able to vet MENDOZA as a reputable reporter," the summary said, before trying to establish a relationship with her because of her expertise in writing about

forced labor. Mendoza won her second Pulitzer Prize in 2016 as part of a team that reported on slave labor in the fishing industry in Southeast Asia.

Dan White, Rambo's supervisor in Washington, told investigators that his unit ran Mendoza through multiple databases, and "CBP discovered that one of the phone numbers on Mendoza's phone was connected with a terrorist," Yahoo News reported. White's case also was referred for prosecution and declined.

In response, AP's Easton said, "The Associated Press demands an immediate explanation from U.S. Customs and Border Protection as to why journalists including AP investigative reporter Martha Mendoza were run through databases used to track terrorists and identified as potential confidential informant recruits."

It was Rambo's outreach to Watkins that led to the inspector general's investigation. While he ostensibly sought her out to further his work on forced labor, Rambo quickly turned the focus to a leak investigation. Rambo even gave it a name, "Operation Whistle Pig," for the brand of whiskey he drank when he met Watkins at a Washington, D.C., bar in June 2017.

The only person charged and convicted stemming from Rambo's efforts is James Wolfe, a former security director for the Senate Intelligence Committee who had a personal relationship with Watkins. Wolfe pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about his contacts with reporters.

In the course of conversations with FBI agents, Rambo was questioned extensively about his interest in Watkins. He used the travel records to confront her about her relationship with Wolfe, asserting that Wolfe was her source for stories. Watkins acknowledged the relationship, but insisted Wolfe did not provide information for her stories.

Rambo said Watkins was not the only reporter whose records he researched through government databases, though he maintained in his interviews with the FBI that he was looking only at whether Wolfe was providing classified information. Rambo said he "conducted CBP record checks" on "15 to 20 national security reporters," according to a FBI summary of the questioning that was contained in the inspector general's report.

New York Times spokeswoman Danielle Rhoades-Ha said new details about the investigation of Watkins raised fresh concerns.

"We are deeply troubled to learn how U.S. Customs and Border Protection ran this investigation into a journalist's sources. As the attorney general has said clearly, the government needs to stop using leak investigations as an excuse to interfere with journalism. It is time for Customs and Border Protection to make public a full record of what happened in this investigation so this sort of improper conduct is not repeated."

Watkins said she, too, was "deeply troubled at the lengths CBP and DHS personnel apparently went to try and identify journalistic sources and dig into my personal life. It was chilling then, and it remains chilling now."

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HEADLINE	12/11 Gulf Arab states court Tehran
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/uae-saudi-iran-diplomacy-nuclear-deal/2021/12/11/8c51edae-586c-11ec-8396-5552bef55c3c_story.html">https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/uae-saudi-iran-diplomacy-nuclear-deal/2021/12/11/8c51edae-586c-11ec-8396-5552bef55c3c_story.html</a>
GIST	Persian Gulf countries that once vociferously opposed the nuclear deal with Iran now say they support its revival, even as they have embarked on their own efforts to engage with Tehran during a period of uncertainty about U.S. staying power in the region.

The Biden administration has expressed approval of what one senior official described as a “quite striking” about-face, and credited it in large part to U.S. diplomatic outreach.

The official pointed to a statement issued last month after talks between the United States and the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council that urged a “mutual return to full compliance with the JCPOA.” The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action between Iran and world powers began to fall apart when President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the pact.

But while regional governments share the administration’s desire to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, their enthusiasm for removing sanctions varies. And any change in their perspective, according to regional officials and experts, has as much to do with their unease about Washington as it does with Tehran.

Governments such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates worry that failure to achieve a negotiated return to the original terms of the nuclear agreement, in which the United States lifted economic sanctions in exchange for strict limits on Iran’s nuclear activities, could lead to a direct confrontation between the United States and Israel against Iran, in which they would bear the brunt of the conflict.

As Iran nuclear talks fail to make headway, Biden administration suggests increasing openness to a Plan B

Their initial belief that the United States would protect them began to dissolve under Trump, who courted their leaders but then seemed to lose interest in them, and it has diminished further under President Biden.

Biden campaigned with a promise that the United States would no longer provide Saudi Arabia with offensive weaponry to prosecute its war against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in neighboring Yemen, and would exact more of a price for Saudi human rights abuses.

Shortly after he took office, Biden lifted the U.S. terrorist designation of the Houthis, and promised to reinvigorate efforts to negotiate a settlement in the war.

Those negotiations have achieved little so far. Last week, renewed Houthi missile and drone attacks on Saudi territory were hailed in Iran, even as the Saudis depleted their stocks of U.S.-supplied ground-launched missile interceptors, and the Senate debated whether to disapprove a proposed administration sale of air-to-air defensive weaponry.

Progress in the U.S. sale of F-35 Stealth aircraft to the Emirates, approved under Trump as an incentive for their establishment of relations with Israel, is now lagging amid disagreements over what sophisticated technology the United States is willing to install in the planes.

“We want to measure twice and cut once,” State Department spokesperson Ned Price said this past week of the pending UAE purchase. “There are still some things to work out.”

The UAE this month signed a \$20 billion deal to purchase 80 French fighter planes.

The Gulf Arab states have long been more immediately concerned with Iran’s proxy wars in the region and its development of ballistic missiles that can reach their territory than with its nuclear program. Just as those issues were put aside during the discussions over the original JCPOA, the United States and its partners in the negotiations have said their first priority is to return to compliance with the deal, with hopes to turn to other concerns later.

Iran has said it has no intention of discussing those regional issues at any time.

Due in part to what they see as the lack of immediate U.S. concern about their worries, the regional states have begun a new effort to set aside the decades-old enmities that have helped fuel conflicts among them, officials in the region say.

The most significant engagement came this past week with a visit to Tehran by the UAE national security adviser, Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed al-Nahyan, who was received by Iran's new hard-line president, Ebrahim Raisi. It was the most senior-level encounter between Iranian and Emirati officials in a decade, and marked what one senior Iranian official called "a new chapter" in relations.

"We have taken steps to de-escalate tensions, as we have no interest in a confrontation. The whole region would pay the price of such a confrontation for decades to come," Anwar Gargash, a senior UAE foreign policy adviser, told the Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate conference ahead of the meeting.

Saudi Arabia has launched its own dialogue with Iran in Baghdad, mediated by the Iraqi government. Those talks are ongoing, although they appear to have made less progress.

The United States welcomes "any direct talks that lead to greater peace and stability in the region," Jennifer Gavito, the deputy assistant secretary of state for Iran and Iraq, told CNBC in October.

The nuclear agreement, the subject of ongoing negotiations among its signers in Vienna, is not the focus of the Arab talks, however. Arab officials have made it clear that they are not prepared to serve as a conduit for parallel negotiations around the nuclear deal, which could undercut the Vienna process, according to a person familiar with the thinking of Gulf leaders.

Iran requested that they do so but was rebuffed, the person said.

Rather, the Gulf states have decided to independently pursue ways of averting conflict, said Riad Kahwija, a Dubai-based defense consultant.

In addition to Iran, the Emiratis are also reaching out to Turkey and Syria — from which they have been estranged for years — and to Qatar, where they joined with Saudi Arabia in a 2017 Trump-fueled spat that resulted in severed diplomatic relations.

This past week, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the de facto Saudi ruler, made a major ice-breaking visit to Doha, the Qatari capital, part of a Gulf-wide tour that some analysts interpreted as a move to solidify Saudi dominance.

The chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the failure of the United States to respond to Houthi drone strikes against Saudi oil facilities and Riyadh, the Saudi capital, along with signals of disinterest in the Middle East from Washington have all contributed to a sense that Arab countries need to take "preemptive" action, Kahwija said.

"Each country is trying to adopt policies that will secure their own interests," he said. "They are no longer tying their ship to the U.S. rope, because this ship seems to be floating without direction in its dealings with Iran."

Although Gulf countries were enraged by the failure of the Obama administration to consult them on the terms of the original JCPOA, they have been somewhat mollified by the extensive regional consultations undertaken by Biden on the revived nuclear talks, said Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, a Dubai-based political analyst.

But their outreach to Iran "is not something American-driven. It's something the region is investing in regardless of whether there is a nuclear deal or not," Abdulla stressed. "We no longer take orders from Washington."

U.S. officials have said that they believe the promise of increased economic relations with others in the region is an incentive to Iran for the Vienna negotiations to succeed. "Many of them are ready to trade with Iran the minute" sanctions are lifted as part of an agreement, said one of several senior administration officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity about the sensitive diplomacy.

	<p>But the downside is an increase in U.S. sanctions if the talks go south. Gargash, speaking this past week to the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, said that “there are already enough sanctions,” and expressed the hope that Iran would respond to the “new environment” the Gulf States are trying to foster by doing more on regional issues. Iran could be particularly helpful in pushing for a cease-fire in Yemen, he said, while noting he has seen no real progress in that direction.</p> <p>Still, the Emirati shift has already resulted in a significant revival of its trade with Iran, which plunged after the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal but is now on track to exceed its pre-2018 levels by March, according to trade figures from both countries.</p> <p>Some of the increased trade suggests that the UAE, a regional banking hub, also appears to be playing a role in helping Iran access foreign currency by facilitating Iranian oil exports to China, said Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, who heads the London-based Bourse and Bazaar think tank and is a visiting fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations. Although the moves technically violate U.S. sanctions, the Biden administration appears to have turned a blind eye, he said.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/11 Federal resources to devastated areas</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/11/us/biden-deploys-federal-resources-to-devastated-areas.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=US%20News">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/11/us/biden-deploys-federal-resources-to-devastated-areas.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=US%20News</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>President Biden directed that federal resources “be surged immediately” to the areas most affected by the tornadoes, according to a statement from the White House.</p> <p>“This morning, I was briefed on the devastating tornadoes across the central U.S. To lose a loved one in a storm like this is an unimaginable tragedy,” Mr. Biden said on Twitter. “We’re working with Governors to ensure they have what they need as the search for survivors and damage assessments continue.” Mr. Biden spoke with Gov. Andy Beshear of Kentucky on Saturday morning and told him that he had directed federal agencies “to provide the speediest assistance possible to impacted communities,” the White House said.</p> <p>The White House said that federal emergency response personnel, water and “other needed commodities” were being deployed.</p> <p>The goal is to direct resources “where there is the greatest need to alleviate suffering from the devastating consequences of these storms,” according to the White House.</p> <p>A White House official said the president and his staff were also in touch with state and local officials as they continued to search for survivors and assess the damage of the storm in order to provide the full support of the federal government.</p> <p>Mr. Biden was briefed by several officials from the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, among others.</p> <p>“Because damage assessments are ongoing, further briefings will be provided to the President in the course of the day,” the White House said.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/11 Hawaii fear: petroleum in drinking water</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/11/us/hawaii-petroleum-navy.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/11/us/hawaii-petroleum-navy.html</a>
<b>GIST</b>	Hawaii health officials have instructed residents living at an Oahu military base to avoid drinking their tap water after high concentrations of diesel fuel were discovered in at least one well, contaminating a system used by tens of thousands of people and several day care centers and schools.

State health officials [announced on Friday](#) that testing of a well overseen by the Navy had detected gasoline- and diesel-range hydrocarbons at levels up to 350 times what the state considers safe for drinking water.

That well, known as the Red Hill shaft, is one of three wells that are run by the Navy, which began receiving complaints last month from residents of Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam who said their water tasted and smelled like gas.

Since then, the Navy has shut down two of its wells, relocated more than 3,000 families to hotels across the island, and distributed bottled water to families and officials.

“The Navy is responsible for this crisis,” Adm. Samuel Paparo, commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, said on Friday at a [public hearing](#) with Navy officials and state legislators. “We are taking ownership of the solutions, and we are going to fix it. We are in the process of fixing this.”

The wells are part of three groundwater sources that provide drinking water to the Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam water system, which serves residents of military housing, the Aliamanu Military Reservation, and several elementary schools and day care centers.

On Thursday, the Navy said it had found [“elevated” amounts of “total petroleum hydrocarbon”](#) in samples taken near another groundwater source, the Aiea Halawa well, which was shut down on Dec. 3. That discovery was announced about a week after the Navy [said samples taken from the Red Hill shaft showed the water had been contaminated](#).

The state said that about 93,000 people have been affected.

Residents have complained of sickened pets and reported symptoms including sore throats, stomach pain, headaches, diarrhea and vomiting. Health officials said that people who were exposed to the contaminated water could also experience difficulty breathing, coughing and red or peeling skin.

“The level of this contaminant poses a public health threat, and is considered unsafe to drink,” Kathleen Ho, deputy director for environmental health at the Hawaii State Department of Health, [said in a statement](#). “We will continue to take all possible action to protect public health and the environment.”

People were also instructed to avoid cooking with the water, bathing in it, or washing dishes and clothes.

“This includes consumption by pets,” [the department said](#).

Health officials said that for the moment, they did not expect long-term health effects to result from the exposure.

Carlos Del Toro, the secretary of the Navy, [said he had suspended operations](#) at the underground storage tanks at the Red Hill military fuel storage site in Oahu.

Navy officials said they believed that the water in the Red Hill well was contaminated after jet fuel spilled into an access tunnel at the site on Nov. 20. The spill was cleaned up in 24 to 30 hours, according to the Navy, but not before it leached into the water system.

“I deeply apologize to each and every one of you and to the people of Hawaii that this incident may have been destructive to your lives in any way,” Secretary Del Toro [told residents of the base on Sunday](#) during a four-hour community meeting.

Health officials in Hawaii have ordered the Navy to clean up its water system and suspend operations at Red Hill.



	<p>Gov. David Ige and members of Hawaii’s congressional delegation have <a href="#">described</a> the contamination issue as a “crisis.”</p> <p>Senator Brian Schatz of Hawaii said the Environmental Protection Agency should take full control of testing and analyzing the water in the system.</p> <p>“We need a trusted independent agency with deep expertise and a mission of environmental protection to take over,” <a href="#">he said in a statement</a>.</p> <p>Secretary Del Toro said last weekend that he was determined to get to the “root cause of this problem” and fix it so that “you can feel confident that the water you are drinking is safe.”</p> <p>Navy officials said at the hearing on Friday that they planned to clean up the Red Hill well by flushing it with 25 million gallons of clean water.</p> <p>The Navy said it would then flush out the water systems in every house and building that had experienced contamination.</p> <p>The plan is to get people back in their homes by Christmas, said Rear Adm. Dean VanderLey, a goal he acknowledged was “very aggressive.”</p> <p>“That remains my personal goal for the sake of our families,” he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 Container ship backlog farther out to sea</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/southern-californias-container-ship-backlog-moves-farther-out-to-sea-11639132381?mod=hp_minor_pos13">https://www.wsj.com/articles/southern-californias-container-ship-backlog-moves-farther-out-to-sea-11639132381?mod=hp_minor_pos13</a>
GIST	<p>The backup of container ships waiting to enter the nation’s busiest port complex isn’t letting up. But it has moved farther from shore.</p> <p>Only about 30 vessels sat within sight of the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach this week, waiting for berths at a gateway that has come to symbolize U.S. supply-chain bottlenecks. More than 60 others destined for the port complex remained in waters farther out to sea, some hundreds or even thousands of miles away, including ships that reduced speed during their voyage from Asia to delay their arrival.</p> <p>The ships are complying with a voluntary system set up last month by maritime officials because of fears the ports can’t safely accommodate the crush of waiting vessels as winter weather sweeps in with strong winds and rough seas.</p> <p>“Container ships are very tall and blow around a lot in the wind,” said Kip Louttit, executive director of the Marine Exchange of Southern California, which monitors ship movements in the area. “The numbers were not going down, so therefore we needed to find a way to spread the ships out.”</p> <p>Before the new system was put in place, many ships rushed across the Pacific to secure a berth at a container terminal by crossing a line 20 nautical miles from the ports, said Jessica Alvarenga, a spokeswoman for the Pacific Merchant Shipping Association, which represents ocean carriers and West Coast terminal operators.</p> <p>Under the new system, ships are placed on a wait list once they leave their last port of call, often in China. That gives captains an estimated date for a berth and allows them to slow their journey to the U.S., Ms. Alvarenga said.</p> <p>The system has hidden from view a big part of the armada of cargo ships waiting to unload. But the backup at the biggest gateway for U.S. container imports remains as large as ever, with the lineup of</p>

vessels now stretching across the Pacific, signaling that big volumes of cargo are still heading for port terminals, warehouses and transportation networks that have been swamped by the imports.

Between January and September, the neighboring ports handled the equivalent of 7.7 million loaded import containers, an increase of 21% from the comparable months of 2019, before the pandemic, according to research and consulting firm Beacon Economics.

The Biden administration and maritime officials have sought to reduce the backlog with measures that included an attempt to extend the hours truckers pick up boxes. The measures have had limited impact, in part because of shortages of workers, trucking equipment and the sheer volume of boxes flowing into and out of the ports.

A month ago, a then-record 86 container ships waited at anchor or in special drift areas within 40 miles of the port complex. By this week, the number of ships waiting for a berth in the area had fallen to 30, according to the Marine Exchange, while another 66 ships were moving toward the port at reduced speeds, known in the industry as slow-steaming, or were waiting outside a new safety zone.

Jim McKenna, chief executive of the Pacific Maritime Association, which represents West Coast terminal operators in labor negotiations, said some ships now take 22 to 24 days to complete a voyage from Asia that used to take 10 to 14 days.

Mr. McKenna said the new system is good for the environment because it keeps pollution from idling ships far from densely populated Southern California and because ships burn less fuel when they slow down.

Ships approaching California from Asia are asked to stay more than 150 miles from shore, while vessels arriving from the north or the south are asked to stay 50 miles from shore so they can spread farther apart from each other and avoid collisions.

Nahal Mogharabi, a spokeswoman for the South Coast Air Quality Management District, an air-pollution agency, said that although the new system reduces the number of ships close to shore, near-shore congestion remains higher than it was before the pandemic.

The California Air Resources Board, another air-pollution agency, estimates that the cargo surge has caused a 60% increase in smog-forming emissions from port activity, Ms. Mogharabi said.

Mr. Louttit said the safety need for the new system was illustrated in November when winds of 40 to 50 knots caused eight ships to drag their anchors along the seabed, while one ship burned out the motor on equipment used to raise its anchor. No damage was caused during that incident, Mr. Louttit said.

Separately, the U.S. Coast Guard is investigating whether an oil spill close to the port complex in October was caused by a waiting ship's dragged anchor hitting an underwater pipeline.

Mr. Louttit said that strong winds sweep across the San Pedro Bay waters off the ports at least once a month during this time of year and that it was "unacceptable to have this many vessels this close together through the winter."

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HEADLINE	12/11 Austria restrictions on unvaxxed working?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/austrias-restrictions-on-the-unvaccinated-appear-to-be-working-11639234806?mod=hp_listb_pos2">https://www.wsj.com/articles/austrias-restrictions-on-the-unvaccinated-appear-to-be-working-11639234806?mod=hp_listb_pos2</a>
GIST	Austria, one of the worst-hit countries in Europe's latest Covid-19 surge, has seen infections plummet and vaccination rates soar after imposing a lockdown and saying it would make the shots mandatory next year.

The measures, and the steep fall in new cases since they were announced, could offer some options to countries in a region where infections are still rising rapidly or plateauing at a high level.

The Alpine republic [introduced a lockdown](#) and said it would mandate vaccines beginning next February on Nov. 22, when the weekly rolling average of daily new cases exceeded 1,500 and hospitals in areas with low vaccination rates were struggling to cope with the influx of patients.

Now, the lockdown is being rolled back across the country as planned, with the number of new daily cases averaging around 400. Meanwhile, the number of people who have had at least one shot of the Covid-19 vaccine now exceeds 72% of the nine-million-strong population, an increase of 2% since the tightening of restrictions, according to official figures.

A special lockdown for the unvaccinated that was introduced on Nov. 15, leaving them unable to enter nonessential businesses, entertainment and sports venues, will remain in place even as restrictions are being lifted for the vaccinated.

Austria's booster rate—the proportion of people who have received three doses—is now the second-highest in Europe after Hungary, with nearly a third of Austrians having taken the booster shot.

As Omicron, a new coronavirus variant believed to be particularly infectious, spreads across Europe, governments in countries such as Germany and Italy are deliberating whether to follow Austria's example and adopt a general vaccine mandate.

Germany's new chancellor, Olaf Scholz, supports the move and Parliament is expected to soon pass a law enabling a mandate that would kick in early next year. On Friday, Parliament passed a vaccine mandate for hospital and nursing personnel.

The Czech Republic's government said Friday it would mandate vaccination for people 60 and older as of March 1, a measure also recently introduced in Greece. Both governments had already announced mandates for certain professions, such as health workers and police.

With the seasonal peak in respiratory infections still several months away, governments across Europe are concerned about already high Covid-19 infection rates and the prospect that Omicron could raise them further. Cases are currently rising rapidly in France and Denmark, edging up in the U.K., and falling gradually from a high level in Germany and Belgium. No country has experienced as steep a fall in cases as Austria.

A new study, meanwhile, found that restrictions that targeted only the unvaccinated increased people's willingness to take the shot compared with restrictions targeting everyone regardless of their immunity status.

The survey by the Munich-based Ifo economic research institute examined vaccination rates in districts along the border between Austria and Germany and found that vaccination increased in Austria under a lockdown targeting only the unvaccinated.

On Oct. 4, Austrian border districts had a vaccination rate of 61.1%, while the figure on the German side, where the unvaccinated could avoid restrictions on visiting bars, restaurants, and other services by undergoing a Covid-19 test, was 57.2%.

By Dec. 4, after Austria had imposed a lockdown on the unvaccinated, the rates had increased to 68% and 61%, respectively, doubling the difference between the two regions. The subsequent extension of the Austrian lockdown to everyone hadn't had an impact on vaccination rates, the researchers said.

An Austrian government spokesman said the study confirmed their behavioral research that found many vaccine skeptics would take the shot if the government mandated it.

	<p>On Thursday, the Austrian government, a coalition between conservatives and the center-left Greens, unveiled details of the vaccine mandate that is set to come into force on Feb. 1.</p> <p>Under the bill, which needs to go through Parliament and could be tested in the courts, everyone who didn't get vaccinated against Covid-19 would receive a fine of up to 3,600 euros, equivalent to \$4,000, that would be imposed every three months if they continue to reject the vaccine.</p> <p>People with certain medical conditions, pregnant women and those able to provide a coronavirus test not older than 180 days would be exempt.</p> <p>Austrian Health Minister Wolfgang Mückstein told journalists on Thursday that vaccination was the only way out of what he called an eternal cycle of lockdowns.</p> <p>"All of us who stand here have long rejected a general vaccination mandate, but we have since been taught a lesson," Mr. Mückstein said.</p> <p>The mandate wasn't intended as a punishment for the unvaccinated, but rather aimed to include them in the efforts to conquer the pandemic, Austria's minister for the constitution, Karoline Edtstadler, told the same press conference.</p> <p>The Vienna government, which changed the law to gain access to medical data that allows identification of all unvaccinated citizens, has started making appointments and sending postal invitations to everyone who hasn't received a shot.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Dozens feared dead after tornadoes hit</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/storms-hit-arkansas-nursing-home-illinois-amazon-warehouse-11639208012?mod=hp_lead_pos8">https://www.wsj.com/articles/storms-hit-arkansas-nursing-home-illinois-amazon-warehouse-11639208012?mod=hp_lead_pos8</a>
GIST	<p>Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear said the number of deaths in his state could exceed 100 after a series of tornadoes ripped across parts of at least five states overnight Friday and early Saturday morning.</p> <p>Four tornadoes touched down in Kentucky, including one that slammed into a candle factory in Mayfield, Ky., a town of about 10,000 people in the state's southwest corner.</p> <p>In Illinois, at least six people were confirmed dead at an Amazon warehouse hit by a tornado in Edwardsville. The city's fire chief, James Whiteford, said in a Saturday evening briefing that 45 people had made it out alive from the facility and that search operations were continuing. Fatalities were also reported at a nursing-home facility in Arkansas.</p> <p>Rescue operations were under way across Kentucky, and the largest death toll was expected to be at the candle factory, where 110 people were working overnight, Mr. Beshear said. Forty people were rescued from the rubble, Mr. Beshear said Saturday afternoon. Earlier in the day, he said no one had been rescued since about 3 a.m. Saturday.</p> <p>He said one of the four tornadoes that hit the state touched down first in Arkansas and tore a path across 200 miles of Kentucky.</p> <p>The governor declared a state of emergency overnight and has deployed the National Guard to help with search and rescue efforts. President Biden signed a federal disaster declaration Saturday.</p> <p>Mr. Biden said the string of deadly storms across Kentucky and a group of central states was "likely one of the largest tornado outbreaks in our history."</p>

The president, addressing the nation from his hometown of Wilmington, Del., said he had spoken with Mr. Beshear and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) about the storms and had approved an emergency declaration in the state.

Mr. Biden said he had spoken extensively with Federal Emergency Management Agency officials, who were assessing the damage in the states and determining ways to speed federal resources to the states.

Mr. Biden told reporters he planned to survey the tornado damage in person once he receives assurances that a presidential visit wouldn't get in the way of the search and recovery efforts. "I do plan on going," he said.

"I promise you, whatever is needed, whatever is needed, the federal government is going to find a way to supply it," Mr. Biden said.

The damage in Kentucky was extensive, with at least one town likely "decimated," the governor said Saturday morning. "We lost people in multiple locations," he said, calling it "something we have never seen before in Kentucky."

The National Weather Service issued several tornado watches and warnings overnight for parts of the Midwest, including Indiana, Kentucky, Illinois and Missouri.

In a statement, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas advised residents to stay on alert, as severe weather remains a threat in the southeast U.S.

Kyanna Parsons-Perez was working at the candle factory Friday night in Mayfield, Ky., when she and other workers were evacuated to a safety area. After the building collapsed, Ms. Parsons-Perez began a Facebook live stream and detailed what was happening as rescuers tried to free her and other trapped workers.

"This is the only thing keeping me calm, so I'm going to keep going. I hope you all are watching," she said at the beginning of the 10-minute video.

In the video, Ms. Parsons-Perez could be heard trying to calm her co-workers, at one point reassuring everyone nearby that they would be fine, because her 40th birthday is Saturday and she planned to celebrate once they were rescued.

"We're going to be OK, baby. I promise," she told one co-worker.

Ms. Parsons-Perez described being trapped in debris in the demolished candle factory.

"We got hit by a tornado and I'm trapped. I'm staying calm, but...I'm not OK," she said. "I was at work and we got hit by a tornado. We are trapped."

She asked someone to call and check on her children at their home in Paducah, Ky., about 30 miles north. "Don't tell them I'm trapped though. Don't tell them what's going on. None of my kids have Facebook. I don't want them to worry about me."

After her rescue, Ms. Parsons-Perez tearfully said "they got me out" as she walked toward a group of paramedics.

Ms. Parsons-Perez later said in television interviews that rescuers ultimately freed her from about 5 feet of rubble.

In Illinois, Edwardsville Police Chief Michael Fillback said that the Amazon fulfillment center in town, about 25 miles east of St. Louis, suffered major structural damage and that more than two dozen people were bused out of the area.

	<p>It wasn't immediately clear whether the damage was caused by straight-line storms or a tornado, but the National Weather Service office near St. Louis reported "radar-confirmed tornadoes" in the Edwardsville area around the time of the collapse.</p> <p>"We've been closely monitoring the terrible situation in Edwardsville, and are heartbroken over the loss of our team members," tweeted Amazon Chief Executive Andy Jassy on Saturday.</p> <p>Amazon founder Jeff Bezos tweeted, "All of Edwardsville should know that the Amazon team is committed to supporting them and will be by their side through this crisis. We extend our fullest gratitude to all the incredible first responders who have worked so tirelessly at the site."</p> <p>In Tennessee four people were killed and at least one person is missing, state officials said Saturday evening.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Uncontrolled HIV link Omicron emergence?</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/11/why-uncontrolled-hiv-may-be-behind-the-emergence-of-omicron">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/11/why-uncontrolled-hiv-may-be-behind-the-emergence-of-omicron</a>
GIST	<p>Where did Omicron come from? By all accounts it is a weird variant. Though highly mutated, it descended not from one of the other variants of concern, such as Alpha, Beta or Delta, but from coronavirus that was circulating maybe 18 months ago. So where has it been all this time? And why is it only wreaking havoc now?</p> <p>Researchers are exploring a number of hunches. One is that Omicron arose in a remote region of southern Africa but failed to spread until now. Another is that it evolved in infected animals, such as rats, and then crossed back into humans. But a third explanation is gaining ground as more data come to light, that Omicron arose in a person with a weakened immune system: someone having cancer treatment perhaps, an organ transplant patient or someone with uncontrolled HIV.</p> <p>The latter possibility has sparked global concern. Sub-Saharan Africa is home to two-thirds of the global population living with HIV. For a whole series of reasons, ranging from lack of access to clinics to fear of stigmatisation and disrupted healthcare, 8 million people in the region are not on effective HIV therapy.</p> <p>Beyond the direct problems this causes with disease progression and vulnerability to Covid – people with advanced or uncontrolled HIV are far more likely to die from coronavirus – is the risk that uncontrolled HIV is driving the emergence of Covid variants.</p> <p>"For me there are two key things," says Dr Richard Lessells, an infectious diseases physician at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, who was part of the team that first reported Omicron. "First there is the science that needs to go on to get a better understanding of this. But more importantly, on a public health level, we don't need to wait for the science. It is a reminder that while addressing the immediate challenge of Covid-19, we also need to intensify efforts to end HIV as a public health problem."</p> <p>The suspicion that variants of concern can evolve in patients with weakened immune systems is not new. The Alpha and Beta variants, first spotted last year in the UK and South Africa respectively, are widely thought to have emerged after long-term infections in patients.</p> <p>The mechanism was laid out by Charles Darwin more than 150 years ago: evolution through natural selection. If a person is infected with Covid but mounts a weak immune response, the infection can persist for months. In that time, antibodies neutralise some of the virus, but not the versions they bind to less well. These surviving viruses proliferate, mutate and undergo further selection – potentially leading to variants that evade immune defences.</p>

A preliminary study posted online this week reveals the process in action. Scientists in South Africa, Lessells among them, traced a particular sample of coronavirus to a 36-year-old woman who was not receiving effective antiviral therapy. Tests revealed that she had harboured the Covid virus for 216 days, in which time it accumulated 32 mutations, making it similar to the vaccine-evading Beta variant. If weakening of the immune system by HIV drives Covid evolution, the researchers say, then antiretroviral therapy must be ramped up to prevent it.

Writing in the journal Nature, Lessells and his colleagues make the case more strongly. They warn that the failure to tackle the Covid pandemic “with sufficient urgency” in countries with high rates of uncontrolled HIV “could lead to the emergence of variants of the coronavirus Sars-CoV-2 that spread more easily between people or render the vaccines less effective”. With Omicron, one possibility is that the virus lingered in an immunocompromised patient for months – explaining why it descends from such an old version – before it acquired the right mutations to break out and spread like wildfire.

The effort needed, then, is huge. Covid has caused massive disruption to healthcare services, with HIV patients among those badly hit. More than 1,300 healthcare workers have died of Covid in South Africa alone. Thousands more may leave the profession because of the unsustainable strain. The UK’s hefty cuts to international aid, including slashing funds for the UN agency focused on fighting HIV/Aids from £15m to £2.5m, will hardly help the situation.

Meanwhile, 70% of Britons are vaccinated against Covid, compared with 7.5% in Africa. What vaccine has arrived on the continent has been prioritised for the oldest, in line with strategies in many countries, but this means few of those with HIV are protected: about 80% of people with HIV in Africa are under 50 years old.

Prof Penny Moore at the University of the Witwatersrand and the National Institute for Communicable Diseases in South Africa said there was “good data” to indicate that immunocompromised people who could not clear Covid infections as quickly as others were a risk for new variants. “That includes HIV-positive people with uncontrolled viral replication, as well other groups like people on immunosuppressants,” she said. “But this is probably still a rare event.

“Increasing access to Covid-19 vaccines will reduce that risk, for sure, and there is a worrying overlap between areas where HIV prevalence is high and Covid-19 vaccine coverage is low,” she added. “I do think we need to translate our sense of urgency from Sars-CoV-2 to HIV prevention and treatment in parallel to tackling uneven vaccine coverage globally.”

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HEADLINE	12/12 Tornado outbreak link to climate change?
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/climate-science-business-weather-tornadoes-f360fab5c31602df3573d3f651ba74d0">https://apnews.com/article/climate-science-business-weather-tornadoes-f360fab5c31602df3573d3f651ba74d0</a>
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON (AP) — The calendar said December but the warm moist air screamed of springtime. Add an eastbound storm front guided by a La Nina weather pattern into that mismatch and it spawned tornadoes that killed dozens over five U.S. states.</p> <p>Tornadoes in December are unusual, but not unheard of. But the <a href="#">ferocity and path length of Friday night’s tornadoes</a> likely put them in a category of their own, meteorologists say. One of the twisters — if it is confirmed to have been just one — likely broke a nearly 100-year-old record for how long a tornado stayed on the ground in a path of destruction, experts said.</p> <p>“One word: remarkable; unbelievable would be another,” said Northern Illinois University meteorology professor Victor Gensini. “It was really a late spring type of setup in in the middle of December.”</p> <p>Warm weather was a crucial ingredient in this tornado outbreak, but whether climate change is a factor is not quite as clear, meteorologists say.</p>



Scientists say figuring out how climate change is affecting the frequency of tornadoes is complicated and their understanding is still evolving. But they do say the atmospheric conditions that give rise to such outbreaks are intensifying in the winter as the planet warms. And tornado alley is shifting farther east away from the Kansas-Oklahoma area and into states where Friday's killers hit.

Here's a look at what's known about Friday's tornado outbreak and the role of climate change in such weather events.

## WHAT CAUSES A TORNADO?

Tornadoes are whirling, vertical air columns that form from thunderstorms and stretch to the ground. They travel with ferocious speed and lay waste to everything in their path.

Thunderstorms occur when denser, drier cold air is pushed over warmer, humid air, conditions scientists call atmospheric instability. As that happens, an updraft is created when the warm air rises. When winds vary in speed or direction at different altitudes — a condition known as wind shear — the updraft will start to spin.

These changes in winds produce the spin necessary for a tornado. For especially strong tornadoes, changes are needed in both the wind's speed and direction.

"When considerable variation in wind is found over the lowest few thousand feet of the atmosphere, tornado-producing 'supercell thunderstorms' are possible," said Paul Markowski, professor of meteorology at Pennsylvania State University. "That's what we had yesterday."

There's usually a lot of wind shear in the winter because of the big difference in temperature and air pressure between the equator and the Arctic, Gensini said.

But usually, there's not a lot of instability in the winter that's needed for tornadoes because the air isn't as warm and humid, Gensini said. This time there was.

## WHAT CONDITIONS LED TO STORMS OF THIS SCALE?

A few factors, which meteorologists will continue to study.

Spring-like temperatures across much of the Midwest and South in December helped bring the warm, moist air that helped form thunderstorms. Some of this is due to La Nina, which generally brings warmer than normal winter temperatures to the Southern U.S. But scientists also expect atypical, warm weather in the winter to become more common as the planet warms.

"The worst-case scenario happened. Warm air in the cold season, middle of the night," said John Gordon, a National Weather Service meteorologist in Louisville, Kentucky.

Once the storm formed, exceptionally strong wind shear appears to have prevented the tornadoes from dissipating, experts say. Tornadoes are thought to die off when thunderstorm updrafts lose energy.

Tornadoes typically lose energy in a matter of minutes, but in this case it was hours, Gensini said. That's partly the reason for the exceptionally long path of Friday's storm, going more than 200 miles (322 kilometers) or so, he said. The record was 219 miles (352 kilometers) and was set by a tornado that struck four states in 1925. Gensini thinks this one will surpass it once meteorologists finish analyzing it.

"In order to get a really long path length, you have to have a really fast moving storm. This storm was moving well over 50 miles (80 kilometers) per hour for a majority of its life," Gensini said. That's not the speed of the winds, but of the overall storm movement.

"You're talking about highway-speed storm motions," Gensini said.

## HOW RELATED IS CLIMATE CHANGE TO TORNADO OUTBREAKS?

It's complicated. Scientists are still trying to sort out the many conflicting factors about whether human-caused climate change is making tornadoes more common — or even more intense. About 1,200 twisters hit the U.S. each year — though that figure can vary — according to the NOAA National Severe Storms Laboratory. No other country sees as many.

Attributing a specific storm like Friday's to the effects of climate change remains very challenging. Less than 10% of severe thunderstorms produce tornadoes, which makes drawing conclusions about climate change and the processes leading up to them tricky, said Harold Brooks, a tornado scientist at the National Severe Storms Laboratory.

Scientists have observed changes taking place to the basic ingredients of a thunderstorm, however, as the planet warms. Gensini says in the aggregate, extreme storms are "becoming more common because we have a lot warmer air masses in the cool season that can support these types of severe weather outbreaks."

The U.S. is likely to see more tornadoes occur in the winter, Brooks said, as national temperatures rise above the long-term average. Fewer events will take place in the summer, he said.

Furtado of the University of Oklahoma said tornado alley, a term used to describe where many twisters hit the U.S., has shifted eastward into the Mississippi River Valley. That shift is because of increases in temperature, moisture and shear.

"Bottom line: The people in the Mississippi River Valley and Ohio River Valley are becoming increasingly vulnerable to more tornadic activity with time," he said.

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HEADLINE	12/11 WA health care coverage signup
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/wednesday-last-day-to-sign-up-for-washington-health-insurance-that-begins-jan-1/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/wednesday-last-day-to-sign-up-for-washington-health-insurance-that-begins-jan-1/</a>
GIST	<p>Wednesday is the last day to sign up for health insurance through the state for coverage beginning Jan. 1. Customers can still sign up through Jan. 15 for coverage that starts Feb. 1.</p> <p>A record number of Washingtonians have signed up for health care coverage using Washington Healthplanfinder, the state's online health insurance marketplace, during this open enrollment period.</p> <p>So far, 217,000 customers have chosen a new plan or re-enrolled in their existing coverage for 2022.</p> <p>That record was set in part due to the American Rescue Plan Act, which expanded options for many people who previously did not qualify for coverage. Plus, many people who previously qualified saw increased savings.</p> <p>"The past year revealed how important health care coverage is to people, and the American Rescue Plan Act is bringing more savings to our customers than ever before," said Washington Health Benefit Exchange CEO Pam MacEwan in a press release. "Now is the best time to get covered and we encourage everyone to do so by Dec. 15 so their coverage can start on Jan. 1."</p> <p>To enroll more customers, officials with Washington Healthplanfinder embarked on a statewide "adventure tour."</p> <p>The adventure tour includes a team of health care navigators, specialists who help people with all of their health care needs. They meet with people face-face to answer their questions, walk them through their options and enroll them in a plan. For those already enrolled, navigators can help them find additional savings.</p>

The adventure tour made a stop Friday outside the Vancouver Mall.

“Enrolling in health care can be a really overwhelming experience for a lot of folks,” said Mary McHale, associate director of outreach with Washington Healthplanfinder, while standing in front of the adventure tour van.

“Sometimes having somebody to guide you through that process is what makes all the difference,” she said. “That’s why we’re here with navigators. We’ve got insurance workers with us, too. We’re just out here helping folks understand that they have health insurance options, and they’re not alone in figuring that out.”

Multiple people learned about the adventure tour through Facebook and came to ask questions and get enrolled. Others saw the large adventure tour van outside with team members handing out hot cocoa.

Some who walked by decided to enroll on the spot.

Language barriers can deter some people from enrolling in coverage, McHale said. To meet this need, most navigators are multilingual, and a translator line is available that can accommodate over 200 languages.

Finding the time to sort through all the options is also a barrier to accessing coverage for some people, McHale said.

“That’s why it’s so important that we have these navigators,” McHale said. “They can take a lot of the pressure off. They can help folks understand what information they need to enroll. Especially for small business owners, that can be a confusing process. There’s some deductions that small business owners can include, and navigators and insurance brokers can help walk them through that process, answer all of their questions, and just take the pressure off.”

If you need help with enrollment or finding savings and you missed the adventure tour, navigators are also available through [WaHealthplanfinder.org](https://www.wahealthplanfinder.org).

“Navigators are available in person, of course with COVID safety protocols,” McHale said. “They’re also available virtually or over the phone. So we have a number of ways for folks to access that assistance in every corner of the state.”

People looking to enroll can also complete the process independently.

“We do have that self-service website, and a lot of folks use that successfully all on their own,” McHale said. “But again, for folks who really just need some assistance or just like to have that reassurance from a trained professional that they are doing it correctly, we have navigators and brokers available.”

McHale stressed how the American Rescue Plan Act increased the availability and lowered the cost of state health care this year. Compared with last year, the number of customers who qualify for monthly premium savings increased by eight percent, and some half of Washington Healthplanfinder customers pay roughly \$100 a month for coverage.

“We’ve always had savings available for folks that make their health plans more affordable, but this year more savings are available than ever before,” McHale said. “Even if you looked at Washington Healthplanfinder before and felt it was out of your price range, I encourage folks return and look again.”

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HEADLINE	12/11 Seattle sues King Co. in garbage fight
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/seattle-sues-king-county-in-garbage-fight/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/seattle-sues-king-county-in-garbage-fight/</a>

We've got a real garbage fight on our hands here.

The city of Seattle has sued King County, seeking nearly \$3 million in fees related to the waste that you put out in the alley behind your home.

The dispute is over who should get the proceeds from about 1,980 tons of "recyclable residuals" collected each month outside of Seattle by King County but processed at facilities within Seattle.

The city and the county have been haggling over the trash cash for more than two years. Since February, they've been splitting the money, about \$170,000 a month, 50/50.

But Seattle has had enough of that and wants a court to rule that the refuse belongs to the city and for the county to pay back \$2.99 million in proceeds it has collected over the course of the dispute.

The [city filed the suit](#) Thursday in King County Superior Court.

Contacted separately, the Seattle City Attorney's Office (which filed the lawsuit) and the King County Department of Natural Resources (which oversees county waste management) responded with a joint statement.

"Seattle and King County share a commitment to appropriately reduce waste and its impacts on the environment, and frequently collaborate on these efforts," the two agencies wrote. "However, in this matter, there are conflicting code language interpretations that require independent review."

"After considerable good faith conversations, Seattle and King County concluded a neutral, third-party decision maker was needed to provide clarity and resolve the difference in the interpretation of each jurisdictions' regulations."

The fight here is not over actual recyclables, for which there is a robust resale market. Rather, it's for the garbage that's left over after the recyclables are sifted and sorted.

Both the county and the city hire contractors to collect the garbage and recycling that gets put out on the curb and in alleys by homes and businesses. The garbage goes to a landfill. (If you're in Seattle it goes by train to Arlington, Oregon, and if you're elsewhere in the county it goes to Cedar Hills landfill in South King County).

Recyclables go to massive processing facilities, where Rube Goldberg-like assembly lines of conveyor belts, air gusts, screens, filters, infrared lights and optical sensors sort your bottles, cans and newspapers into bales of plastic, glass, metal and paper.

Those giant blocks of refuse are then resold. Prices for recyclables have rebounded significantly in recent years. Prices plunged in 2017 and 2018, after China, the leading importer of recyclables, implemented stricter quality controls for some materials and outright bans on others. The price drops forced local processors, unable to find buyers, to send hundreds of tons of recyclables to landfills.

Since then, new domestic markets have emerged, and India, Mexico and Vietnam have increased their recycling imports. U.S. exports of recycled paper and plastic increased last year for the first time since 2018, according to Resource Recycling, a trade publication.

But not everything that ends up at the city's two recycling facilities — Rabanco Recycling Center and Recology Recycling Center, both in Sodo — is recyclable.

What's left is known as residuals, but it is, essentially, garbage. Every time you throw a dirty takeout container or a used mask or an old garden hose in the recycling it ends up becoming a "residual," aka garbage.

	<p>And the city and the county then charge the recycling facilities a fee — the same way you pay a monthly garbage fee — to take that garbage to a landfill.</p> <p>Those fees add up. And the city and county would both like to keep collecting them.</p> <p>The city’s argument cites the state constitution, state law, and city and county code to argue that waste disposal within a city is the realm of the city, regardless of whether the waste may have originated from outside the city.</p> <p>“The State of Washington’s regulatory framework for the disposal of solid waste assigns primary responsibility to cities within their limits,” Seattle writes in its lawsuit. “King County has no authority to direct the handling, collection of, or disposal of solid waste within the limits of the City.”</p> <p>King County has previously told the recycling facilities that waste from outside the city — from unincorporated areas and from smaller cities it contracts with for waste removal — should stay in the county system.</p> <p>There is, however, one thing both sides agree on: Recyclables, when you put them in your bin, should be empty, clean and dry. And, please, no plastic wrap or loose plastic bags; they tangle in the processing equipment, resulting in costly shutdowns and repairs and driving down everyone’s proceeds.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Avalanche Crystal Mountain: 1 dead</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/1-dead-5-rescued-from-crystal-mountain-avalanche/281-ba6908ed-3953-4a58-b312-9a8e45130cd6">https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/1-dead-5-rescued-from-crystal-mountain-avalanche/281-ba6908ed-3953-4a58-b312-9a8e45130cd6</a>
GIST	<p>PIERCE COUNTY, Wash. — One person is dead and five others were rescued after an avalanche on Crystal Mountain Saturday morning.</p> <p>According to the Pierce County Sheriff’s Department (PCSD), six skiers were swept up in an avalanche at Silver Basin in the backcountry ski area around 10:50 a.m. Silver Basin is located outside of the regular ski area boundary.</p> <p>According to a representative from the Crystal Mountain Resort, the area was closed due to the storm moving through and there was no avalanche mitigation done on the area.</p> <p>All six skiers were wearing emergency beacons.</p> <p>Five of the skiers pulled themselves to safety, the PCSD said. One of the six skiers was unresponsive, and life-saving efforts were unsuccessful. The skier who died was a 60-year-old man. His identity has not been released.</p> <p>It’s unknown if any of the other skiers suffered any injuries.</p> <p>Crystal Mountain Resort <a href="#">reported winds of up to nearly 100 mph</a> at the summit Saturday morning. Due to the high winds, the Mount Rainier Gondola was not operating.</p> <p>Only the beginner and intermediate lifts at Crystal Mountain were open Saturday, and only the lower mountain was lift serviced. The resort is maintaining normal operations as the avalanche occurred in the backcountry.</p> <p>The <a href="#">National Weather Service</a> issued a Winter Storm Warning for the Cascades until Sunday morning after a storm brought heavy snow to the mountains this week. Heavy snow is expected to continue for areas above 2,000 feet by Saturday night. Additional snow accumulations of 12-15 inches are possible by Sunday.</p>

	<p>As of 8 a.m., at least 11 inches of snow had fallen at Crystal Mountain in the past 24 hours.</p> <p>There is a “considerable” avalanche risk for the <a href="#">Olympics</a>, <a href="#">Snoqualmie Pass</a>, and the <a href="#">west</a> and <a href="#">south</a> slopes of the Cascades Saturday, according to the Northwest Avalanche Center (NWAC). There is a “<a href="#">high</a>” avalanche risk for the northern slopes of the Cascades.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Brazil grapples w/inflation amid pandemic</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/brazil-grapples-with-old-nemesis-inflation-amid-pandemic-11639234804?mod=lead_feature_below_a_pos1">https://www.wsj.com/articles/brazil-grapples-with-old-nemesis-inflation-amid-pandemic-11639234804?mod=lead_feature_below_a_pos1</a>
GIST	<p>SÃO PAULO—Inflation is surging in Brazil, forcing a country with one of the highest death rates from Covid-19 to grapple with the economic fallout of the pandemic.</p> <p>While the global economy is forecast to rebound more than 4% next year, including in countries bordering Brazil, more economists expect Brazil to remain stuck in recession during 2022 as it battles one of the world’s highest annual inflation rates of 10.7%.</p> <p>“Brazil really stands out—its inflation rate has risen much faster than almost any other emerging economy, and you can really see that hitting consumers,” said William Jackson, chief emerging-markets economist at the London-based research firm Capital Economics.</p> <p>Inflation rates from Canada to Germany have climbed to the highest level in decades as businesses and consumers emerge from lockdowns, boosting energy prices and prompting supply bottlenecks. U.S. inflation hit a 39-year high in November, the government reported Friday.</p> <p>Brazil, which suffered punishing hyperinflation in the 1980s and 1990s, has faced a tougher struggle against its old nemesis—one that economists said could weigh on growth for at least the next year. Credit Suisse and Itaú Unibanco, one of Brazil’s biggest banks, cut their growth forecasts recently and now predict the country’s economy to contract 0.5% next year.</p> <p>Latin America’s biggest economy was only eking out feeble growth before the pandemic hit. A sharp slump since July in the price of iron ore, one of Brazil’s top exports, has stymied recent growth. But the return of inflation is proving to be the biggest obstacle to economic recovery, economists said.</p> <p>At 10.7%, Brazil’s 12-month inflation rate is the third-highest among the major developed and emerging economies that form the Group of 20, after Turkey and Argentina, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. A severe drought, the worst in almost a century, has contributed to inflation, drying up hydroelectric reservoirs and adding to demand at more-expensive thermal plants.</p> <p>A sharp depreciation in the Brazilian real—which has lost about 25% of its value against the dollar over the past two years—has increased the price of imported goods including fuel, adding to inflation.</p> <p>President Jair Bolsonaro’s efforts to boost spending for the poor before next year’s election, at the expense of the country’s fiscal health, are partly to blame for the currency weakness. Impending interest-rate increases in the U.S. risk boosting inflation further in Brazil and other emerging-market economies by strengthening the dollar against currencies such as the real.</p> <p>Brazil’s history of hyperinflation makes it harder to fight rising prices today. One vestige is indexation, under which the country links costs such as wages to inflation to protect the purchasing power of companies and average Brazilians in the midst of spiraling prices.</p> <p>The downside is that temporary price shocks—such as those affecting the global economy—end up sticking. A temporary surge in the price of oil, for example, increases wages and boosts demand for other goods.</p>

“Brazil’s situation is worse than elsewhere in Latin America and other countries across the world,” said André Perfeito, chief economist at Necton, a São Paulo-based brokerage. “Indexation ends up amplifying external price shocks.”

Some economists point to particularly high inflation rates across Brazil and much of Latin America as a cruel reward for the region’s rapid progress in vaccinating swaths of the population over recent months, allowing an abrupt return to a nearly normal life. About 65% of all Brazilians are now fully vaccinated against Covid-19, more than the U.S. and a sharp rise from six months ago, when only 11% were fully inoculated.

The return to double-digit inflation has had a crushing effect on the poor, who were already reeling from the pandemic. More than one in nine people who have died from Covid-19 around the world were from Brazil, which has the highest per capita death rate from the disease among the 40 most-populous countries, according to the University of Oxford’s Our World in Data project.

As with millions of Brazil’s poorest families, Lucilene de Souza, a single mother of three from São Paulo, hasn’t been able to afford to eat meat for months. After losing her job at a restaurant when the pandemic hit nearly two years ago, she spends her days begging for food outside a shopping mall.

“I’m scared...my youngest is just 4, and I can’t afford what he needs,” she said. “The government handouts aren’t enough with prices like this.”

Economists don’t see a risk that price increases will spiral out of control in the country, predicting that 12-month inflation will slow to 5% by the end of next year and 3.5% in 2023. The deepest concern, instead, is that the aggressive interest-rate increases that Brazil’s central bank is using to combat inflation will crush any post-pandemic economic recovery.

Since March the central bank has raised the benchmark lending rate by more than 7 percentage points to 9.25%, taking it from a record low of 2% to the highest level in more than four years. Economists expect it to reach double-digits next year.

In Brazil, where older generations remember the dark days when hyperinflation wiped out their savings and sent them rushing to the grocery store after every paycheck, the central bank is still battling to prove its credibility.

While the Federal Reserve in the U.S. and other central banks in developed countries have taken a cautious approach to what they see as temporary price shocks in the wake of the pandemic, Brazil doesn’t have that luxury. The central bank has no choice but to aggressively raise rates if it wants to prevent an even worse scenario, said Alberto Ramos, an economist at Goldman Sachs.

If the central bank doesn’t raise rates, Brazil risks losing control over inflation expectations, creating a scenario in which businesses could charge more and employees demand higher wages if they expect prices to rise, thereby stoking inflation. With Brazil’s history of runaway prices, any sign that the central bank is losing control of inflation risks scaring away foreign investors, potentially sparking mass capital flight, weakening Brazil’s currency and stoking inflation.

“If they don’t act, inflation runs higher...and then becomes a lot costlier to bring down later on,” said Mr. Ramos.

Global price surges couldn’t have come at a worse time for Brazil’s central bank, economists said.

After decades of debate, the government gave the central bank formal independence earlier this year. That has raised pressure internally on the central-bank monetary committee to be even more hawkish. Twelve-month inflation is already expected to exceed the country’s 3.75% inflation target this year by a wide margin.



	“The central bank is not going to want to miss the 2022 target too,” said Mr. Perfeito. “Imagine how that would look? They get independence, and then they miss the target two years in a row.”
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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Inflation hits worn-down workers</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/inflation-workers-covid-19-11639155373?mod=hp_lead_pos2">https://www.wsj.com/articles/inflation-workers-covid-19-11639155373?mod=hp_lead_pos2</a>
GIST	<p>AROOSTOOK COUNTY, Maine— Melissa Holmes works 60 hours a week, up from 40 before the pandemic, managing the short-staffed One Stop Tulsa gas station and convenience store on a snowy stretch in rural northern Maine.</p> <p>All that extra work, at \$15 an hour, means she’s earning more. But Ms. Holmes says <a href="#">rising costs, for everything from food to electricity</a>, coupled with weariness from <a href="#">the state’s monthslong Covid-19 surge</a>, have left her feeling depleted.</p> <p>“I’m not going to lie,” she said during a recent shift at the store. “It is very stressful trying to keep up with everything—my bills at home and trying to balance everything here.”</p> <p>A dichotomy is unfolding around the U.S., including in Aroostook County, a picturesque but long economically challenged timber and potato-harvesting region along the Canadian border, where median household income hovered just above \$41,000 a year pre-pandemic, census data show. Lately jobs abound, consumer demand is up and roadside signs tout signing bonuses as the economy improves. Yet many workers and small-business owners say they are frustrated with inflation, which <a href="#">hit a 39-year high in November</a>, and with the still-disruptive effects of the pandemic.</p> <p>Ms. Holmes said she spends more than \$60 to fill her 2011 Ford Explorer, up from about \$40 a year ago—although <a href="#">gasoline prices have recently been dropping</a>. She said her twice-monthly grocery bill is nearly \$500, up from \$300.</p> <p>Tension trails her to work. She said she had to close early the other day when another employee couldn’t make a shift after being exposed to Covid-19 elsewhere. And she described facing customers who are angry about higher prices, like one man who recently flung an order of chicken tenders at her, irate that they had jumped to \$8.99 from \$5.49, she said.</p> <p>One Stop Tulsa owner Mark Perreault said his own <a href="#">cost for chicken</a> is “through the roof.”</p> <p>While nearly two-thirds of the largest U.S. public companies have <a href="#">reaped higher profit margins</a> as executives across industries raise prices on consumers, most Americans say <a href="#">inflation is causing them at least some financial strain</a>, a recent Wall Street Journal poll found. November’s consumer prices were up 6.8% from a year earlier, the Labor Department said Friday, amid continuing high demand and supply shortages.</p> <p>Another One Stop employee, 50-year-old cashier and deli worker David Day, said he and his wife had walked into a nearby Subway sandwich shop the night before, looked at the prices and walked out.</p> <p>“We drove right out of the parking lot. We can’t afford that,” he said.</p> <p>Winter heating costs are also expected to be higher than recent years. Across the country, prices for natural gas—used by about half of U.S. homes for space and water heating—<a href="#">have fallen since an October spike</a> but are about 50% higher than a year ago. Maine leads the nation in the share of households reliant on heating oil, which averaged \$3.16 a gallon statewide in November, up nearly 64% from last year.</p> <p>Federal pandemic rental aid <a href="#">continues to support many households’ finances</a>, as do loosened guidelines for low-income fuel assistance that offers partial help with bills. But some people are either unaware or unwilling to reach out for help, and many others can earn too much to qualify.</p>

That includes the family of Chelsie Johnson, of Presque Isle, Aroostook County's largest city. She celebrated in October after starting a new job in child-protective service, making \$27 an hour versus \$21 before. The 33-year-old said Congress's [expansion of the child tax credit](#) also helps her and her husband, who works for the state's drug-enforcement agency.

Yet their budget is tight, with groceries now topping \$200 a week, compared with \$120 to \$150 a year ago. Electricity bills in her area are set to rise about 30% in January, according to the Maine Public Utilities Commission. To conserve oil, the couple uses space heaters in their 19-month-old son's room at night, and Ms. Johnson wears a heated blanket around the house.

"There really isn't any extra money anywhere," she said.

Ms. Johnson said her main stressor is that recently her son's daycare has twice sent him home for 10 days at a time after coming in close contact with someone who had Covid-19. She has had to navigate time off and miss in-person training at her new job. "I feel a bit of insecurity with my employment," she said.

Phil Cyr, whose family owns two area nursing homes, says he believes [child-care obstacles](#) and [early retirements during the pandemic](#) are making it tough to fill jobs. A sign outside the family's Presque Isle Rehab and Nursing Center touted a "\$10,000 sign-on bonus" for certified nursing assistants and others. Mr. Cyr later upped it to \$15,000.

"I've been at this since 1976, and we've never seen this before," he said, "but then we've not had a Covid pandemic before either."

Maine's Covid-19 surge began late this summer, fueled by the highly contagious Delta variant. Gov. Janet Mills on Wednesday activated the National Guard to help amid new records for the number of Covid-19 patients who are hospitalized, in intensive care beds and on ventilators—most of whom aren't fully vaccinated, according to the governor's office.

About 64% of Aroostook County's population is fully vaccinated, compared with the state's nearly 74% rate, data show. The county is a recent Covid-19 hot spot, with one of Maine's highest recent rates of confirmed cases per 10,000 people.

The Aroostook County Action Program, a nonprofit social-services agency, is seeing more people worn down by the intertwined economic and health crises.

"People are just exhausted," said Jason Parent, the agency's chief. "Every time you attempt to bring life back to normal, something else hits."

Sherry Locke, another ACAP official, said families just above the poverty line or even middle class are reaching out for the first time, "whether that's because of rising prices, child care that has been closed or some of them are just sick and can't go back to work," she said.

On an early December day, stockings and lights festooned One Stop Tulsa, thanks to the tightknit crew of workers who said they had recently gone to the dollar store to get decorations to brighten the mood. One employee said she was feeling optimistic and was planning to apply for a higher-paying job at a nearby nursing home.

But their conversations also reflected gloomier times. Cashier Renee Fancher, 36, said she had to enlist her father to babysit her daughter that morning, after her regular sitter was exposed to Covid-19.

Ms. Holmes, the manager, broke it to another employee that a regular customer, a man in his 30s who worked at the nearby french-fry factory, had died of Covid-19 the night before.

"I'm not in the Christmas spirit this year," Ms. Holmes said.

HEADLINE	12/10 Inflation reaches 6.8%; highest in 40yrs
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/10/inflation-reaches-68-highest-40-years-government-r/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/10/inflation-reaches-68-highest-40-years-government-r/</a>
GIST	<p>Prices climbed 6.8% in November compared to last year, a 40-year high, putting the squeeze on American consumers and complicating the political outlook for President Biden and Democrats pushing their big-spending plans.</p> <p>Prices rose 0.8% in November compared to October and spread into multiple sectors of the economy, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported Friday.</p> <p>“The indexes for gasoline, shelter, food, used cars and trucks, and new vehicles were among the larger contributors,” the bureau said. “Along with shelter, used cars and trucks, and new vehicles, the indexes for household furnishings and operations, apparel and airline fares were among those that increased.”</p> <p>Mr. Biden acknowledged that Americans are paying more, but argued the data does not reflect slow improvements.</p> <p>“Developments in the weeks after these data were collected last month show that price and cost increases are slowing, although not as quickly as we’d like. Half of the price increases in this report are in cars and energy costs from November. Since then, we have seen significant energy price reductions. Gas prices nationally are down from their peak,” Mr. Biden said.</p> <p>He said, “Even with this progress, price increases continue to squeeze family budgets. We are making progress on pandemic-related challenges to our supply chain which make it more expensive to get goods on shelves, and I expect more progress on that in the weeks ahead.”</p> <p>Consumer demand has risen as Americans try to shake off the coronavirus doldrums and spend household cash they saved or received from a government-rescue package earlier this year.</p> <p>Yet much of the spending has been on cars and other goods instead of services and social experiences, and bottlenecks at key links in the supply chain have resulted in higher prices.</p> <p>Airline fares and rents have increased, while grocery shoppers are seeing higher prices on common items. Dollar Tree said it is increasing prices on most items to \$1.25.</p> <p>Prices hikes have been bigger and longer-lasting than predicted and are putting the White House, which had argued inflation was transitory, in an awkward position as it tries to pass a multitrillion-dollar social welfare plan.</p> <p>Sen. Joe Manchin III, West Virginia Democrat, has pointed squarely at inflation as the reason he is hesitant to approve the “Build Back Better” bill.</p> <p>Former Vice President Mike Pence, who is weighing his political future, said it is time to pull the plug on Mr. Biden’s legislation.</p> <p>“Today’s consumer price index showing inflation at a 40-year high is bad news for American families struggling to make ends meet and proves that the socialist policies that dominate the Democratic Party are failing our country,” he said through his policy advocacy group, Advancing American Freedom. “Now more than ever, it’s time to turn off the spigot of runaway spending in Washington, D.C., and reject President Biden’s tax and spend monstrosity working its way through Congress.”</p> <p>Sen. Kevin Cramer, North Dakota Republican, called the inflation “a de facto tax, chipping away at family’s paychecks and eating the savings of hardworking American families.”</p> <p>“Build Back Broke would only make it worse!” he said.</p>

Mr. Biden and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi took the opposite view, saying the bill would provide immediate cost relief, allow parents to return to the workforce sooner and bolster the economy over the long term.

“The challenge of prices underscores the importance that Congress move without delay to pass my Build Back Better plan, which lowers how much families pay for health care, prescription drugs, child care and more,” Mr. Biden said. “American families should not have to wait to get relief on the cost of prescription drugs like insulin, or see their childcare costs cut by more than half.”

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HEADLINE	12/11 More colleges rethink student loans
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/12/11/colleges-remove-student-loans/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/12/11/colleges-remove-student-loans/</a>
GIST	<p>Ohio State University and Smith College are the latest institutions to try to spare another generation of undergraduates from shouldering an all-too-common burden: student debt.</p> <p>Starting next fall, the schools will take loans out of their financial packages and instead pour philanthropic dollars into more grant aid for undergraduates. The decision is rooted in an awareness that affordability is at the heart of national conversations about student debt.</p> <p>The public policy debate over broad student debt cancellation is forcing colleges to confront their role in a lending system that provides critical access for those wanting to attend but comes at a cost that can limit the value of higher education. Eliminating the need to borrow positions colleges to attract and retain strong students, but sustaining and scaling the policy is challenging.</p> <p>There is a reason only 76 colleges and universities have adopted no-loan policies since Princeton University’s seminal program in 2001: It is expensive. Most schools employing the strategy have large endowments, enroll nominal numbers of needy students and are selective institutions. Some universities counted in the ranks restrict eligibility or have had to scale back their programs.</p> <p>Still, as institutions compete for the best students — who are increasingly price-sensitive or may lack financial resources — bolstering grants to supplant debt may become a central component of more aid packages.</p> <p>“Colleges are legitimately worried about student loan debt, but they’re also concerned that if they don’t do this, they won’t be able to compete for the students they want,” said Robert Kelchen, a higher education professor at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville.</p> <p>In many ways, Smith fits the profile of the typical college with a no-loan policy. The liberal arts college in western Massachusetts educates about 2,600 women at the undergraduate level, with a \$2 billion endowment. It has a prestigious reputation but Smith President Kathleen McCartney wants to center its inclusiveness with the new financial aid policy.</p> <p>“There was a real racial disparity in borrowing — 89 percent of our Black students had loans and only 56 percent of our White students,” McCartney said. “We’ve been working on a plan to promote racial justice and equity, and we thought we just have to eliminate loans. That will send a powerful message to our students that we are serious about racial justice.”</p> <p>About 60 percent of Smith students rely on financial aid and graduate with an average of \$19,000 in debt. While that’s below the national average of roughly \$30,000, McCartney said she believes the college could do more. Double-digit endowment returns coupled with a \$50 million gift from a graduate has created a path.</p> <p>A portion of the money will fund one-time grants of \$1,000 for low-income students to start their college careers and \$2,000 grants for graduating seniors to embark on life after college. Taken as a whole, the</p>

student aid initiatives represent a \$7 million annual increase to Smith's financial aid budget. The college anticipates it will award more than \$90 million in aid next year.

Freshman Livie Johnston, 18, said she nearly cried after reading McCartney's email announcing the initiatives. The Minnesota native has borrowed \$3,500 in her first year and until now had anticipated relying on loans until graduation.

"I'm completely covered by Smith's financial aid for the next three years of my education here, which makes a really big difference for the affordability of grad school," said Johnston, who plans to major in English before pursuing a master's degree in library and information science. "This really takes a lot of the stress off."

Giving undergraduates an opportunity to pursue their dreams without being encumbered by debt is exactly what McCartney said Smith is trying to provide. But is this sustainable?

"We've done the modeling so that even if there's a downturn, we'll still be able to support this program," McCartney said. "This is a real priority. And we're going to steward the endowment carefully so that it remains a priority."

Colleges and universities have had mixed results with loan reduction policies.

Some institutions, such as Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, have expanded their programs to include more students. At least two, Carleton College in Minnesota and Claremont McKenna College in California, ended their policies in the wake of the Great Recession of 2008. Several others, including Dartmouth College and Yale University, have reduced the generosity of their policies for middle- and upper-income students.

Some schools have been victims of their own success. Take the University of Virginia, which introduced AccessUVa in 2004 for all undergraduates from families earning less than twice the federal poverty guideline. The initiative boosted socioeconomic diversity at the public flagship. But costs nearly quadrupled as enrollment climbed, leading U-Va. to reintroduce loans a decade later.

Students protested the decision and the university maintained that it still offered generous financial aid packages to those in need. In the aftermath, U-Va. scored large donations that bolstered aid for low-income students, but never resurrected the no-loan initiative.

"There is a lot volatility in these sorts of programs that naturally limit the types of institutions that can sustain them," said Dominique Baker, an assistant professor of education policy at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

Fluctuations in eligible students come at a cost and colleges have to account for every dollar, she said. As a result, fundraising is critical to the life span of these programs. Kelchen, at the University of Tennessee, said donors seem more interested in supporting students than facilities these days, affording colleges an opportunity to focus fundraising campaigns on financial aid.

Philanthropy is a driving force behind Ohio State's Scarlet & Gray Advantage program. The university plans to raise \$800 million, including \$500 million in endowments, over the next decade so no student, regardless of income, has to rely on loans. It's an ambitious plan for an institution with 53,000 undergraduates.

To kick off the campaign, Ohio State and its top donors are creating a \$50 million pool to match the first \$50 million in private donations. President Kristina M. Johnson estimates that philanthropy will account for 45 percent of what's needed to keep the policy alive. She said the program has staying power because of the university's multifaceted approach.

All participating students will be afforded opportunities to work on or off-campus, with the expectation of contributing their earnings to their education. A mix of scholarships, state grants and federal grants will contribute to the remaining expenses.

Johnson said the new policy is built on a foundation of existing cost-saving measures, including freezing tuition for in-state students and using less expensive open-access textbooks, that have already driven down borrowing at Ohio State. Less than half of students who earned a bachelor's degree in 2020 had debt. Those that did owed an average of \$27,000.

"Sustainability requires intentionality," Johnson said. "We are looking at being more efficient, more effective."

The program will start off in the fall of 2022 with 125 students as a pilot. Unlike other loan reduction programs at public institutions, which are targeted to state residents, such as the University of Michigan, Ohio State's will also be open to out-of-state students. The decision could add substantial cost to the initiative as nonresidents pay more tuition, but Johnson points out that roughly 80 percent of undergrads hail from the Buckeye State.

While no-loan policies can dramatically reduce student debt, they don't always eliminate the need to borrow. Most schools with these policies, including Smith and Ohio State, use grants or alternatives to loans to address what's known as demonstrated financial need — the difference between the cost of attendance and expected family contribution (EFC).

Because of the way the EFC is calculated — with a mix of income, assets and household size — the dollar amount may be more than a family can afford to pay out of pocket. Despite Princeton's long-standing no-loan policy, about 17 percent of recent seniors graduated with an average \$9,400 in debt, according to the school.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 UN vaccination initiative falls short</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/10/covax-doses-delivered/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/10/covax-doses-delivered/</a>
GIST	<p>Covax, an expansive vaccine-sharing initiative to get <a href="#">coronavirus</a> vaccine doses to low- and middle-income nations, once pledged to deliver more than 2 billion shots worldwide by the end of the year. But as the days tick down, it is scrambling to deliver well under half that figure.</p> <p>The initiative, led by the United Nations, is now racing to deliver 800 million doses by the end of the year, according to interviews with senior officials involved in Covax, which includes the World Health Organization and other groups. Even if that benchmark is met, it will be a far cry from the 2.3 billion doses hoped for in January by a program designed to counter a glut of vaccines in wealthy nations.</p> <p>Covax lowered its estimate of doses delivered in 2021 to between 800 million and 1 billion doses late this year after a range of complications with supply and delivery. Omicron, a variant first detected in southern Africa, has added urgency to the need for vaccines, but also disrupted shipping and could upend Covax's hopes for more regular shipments in 2022.</p> <p>Though the organization was set up to pool money to purchase its own doses from a variety of manufacturers, many of those orders were delayed in the first part of the year, and the organization increasingly relies upon donations from the United States and other wealthy countries of vaccines including the AstraZeneca-Oxford, Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna and Johnson &amp; Johnson jabs. The Biden administration <a href="#">pledged in September</a> to donate or facilitate the purchase of 1.1 billion doses to Covax, though many of those doses are not expected to arrive until next year.</p> <p>Officials with the organizations backing Covax said this week that they cannot predict for certain how many doses will have been delivered by Jan. 1.</p>

“That number is probably going to be over 800 million by the end of the year,” said Richard Hatchett, chief executive of the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, or CEPI, one of the key organizations backing Covax along with the vaccine alliance Gavi and the World Health Organization.

WHO vaccine director Kate O’Brien said that they were expecting to meet the 800 million threshold soon, but added that there was some “wiggle room there” and the final date could fall into early 2022.

“The opera isn’t over till the fat lady sings, right? So we won’t know until we know, but we are working intensively, literally around-the-clock to try, to get as many shipments out as possible,” O’Brien said.

Covax officials downplayed the significance of the final 2021 number. But some critics of the organization said it was further proof that Covax had failed to live up to the expectations it set in the early months of the coronavirus pandemic.

“Covax is not on track to meeting its modest targets, let alone vaccinating the world,” said Zain Rizvi, a researcher with consumer rights advocacy group Public Citizen. “This failure reflects the yawning gap between the rhetoric and reality of global vaccine access.”

Meeting the 800 million doses threshold will be a push, even though deliveries through Covax have been increasing.

By the end of November, Covax had delivered 596 million doses around the world, according to a dashboard of vaccine deliveries maintained by UNICEF. To get out 800 million doses this year, Covax would need to deliver more than 200 million doses this month — more than any monthly level so far.

Officials say, however, that the rate of deliveries could increase before the end of the month. The monthly rate of deliveries has increased steadily since September, with a Covax record of more than 150 million doses delivered in November, according to UNICEF data.

“In the last few days, I think we’ve moved like 11 million doses a day on a couple of occasions,” Hatchett said.

Covax struggled with supply issues since its founding. The initiative had sought to pool resources to buy a portfolio of doses, ensuring that all countries had access to vaccines for their most vulnerable population. Almost 200 countries signed up to be a part of Covax, with the organization raising billions of dollars in funding.

But while many wealthy nations supported Covax, they also placed advance orders with vaccine manufacturers before Covax could raise enough money to do so. That pushed the initiative to the back of the queue. Later, supplies were further strained when one of the initiative’s major suppliers of vaccine doses, the Serum Institute of India, was blocked from exporting after a wave of cases linked to the delta variant hit the country.

Low-income nations have administered just over 60 million doses so far, according to Our World in Data, a fraction of the 326 million booster shots that have been delivered in mostly high-income nations.

Some of Covax’s supply issues have since been alleviated, largely due to donated doses from wealthy nations and the resumption of Indian exports in November. But significant challenges remain with transporting and administering the vaccines in some nations, officials say.

Donated doses often come with additional complications, including shorter shelf lives before expiration.

Critics say that the initiative has not been transparent enough about its supply issues. Covax had repeatedly “downgraded their targets, and then missed those targets, and then downgraded those targets again,” said James Krellenstein, co-founder of health-equity organization PrEP4All.



The 2 billion figure has hung over Covax since before it was started. In a March 25, 2020, white paper that called for a new “globally fair allocation system for Covid-19 vaccines” — a proposal that would help shape Covax, which formed the following month — Hatchett called for a system to “provide a minimum of 1-2 billion doses of vaccine per year for a minimum of three years.”

A supply forecast released in January said that “almost 2.3 billion doses” could be “rolled out worldwide” through Covax in 2021. In a joint statement in May, Covax said that the initiative’s original objective to deliver “2 billion doses of vaccines worldwide in 2021” was “still well within reach.”

That soon changed. A supply forecast released on Sept. 8 said that the initiative expected to have 1.425 billion doses in available supply, cumulatively, by the end of the year. It did not specify how many of these doses would have been delivered to recipient countries.

The number of doses expected to be delivered by Covax appeared to decline again in November, when an internal meeting report released on Nov. 22 said that Covax had set a target to “to ship between [800 million] and 1 billion doses in total by year end.”

The immediate issue is no longer supply, but logistics. Roughly 1.2 billion vaccine doses had now been released for Covax, O’Brien said, but not all countries were ready for them.

“We’re in this hybrid space where we’re very much in the shift between supply-constrained to more demand-driven uptake,” O’Brien said.

It remains unclear how variants like omicron could impact Covax’s ambitions going forward. In an interview in November, before the variant was identified, Seth Berkley, chief executive of Gavi, said that Covax’s “supply scarcity” could continue into the first and second fiscal quarter of 2022, but should become regular after then. On Friday, Gavi announced a new agreement with Moderna for an additional 150 million doses to become available next year, while 20 million doses originally scheduled for 2022 were to be made available before the end of the year.

But Berkley and other Covax officials have said they were still waiting for more data about how existing vaccines performed against the omicron variant, which has been shown to elude some of the disease-fighting antibodies produced by vaccines.

“Things could go pretty sideways, pretty fast, if some countries decide to start hoarding and stockpiling vaccines,” O’Brien said.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Kentucky declares state of emergency</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/11/us/kentucky-tornado.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/11/us/kentucky-tornado.html</a>
GIST	<p>Gov. Andy Beshear of Kentucky declared a state of emergency on Friday as tornadoes unleashed death and destruction along a path extending more than 200 miles, a disaster that officials expect to emerge as one of the most devastating in the state’s history.</p> <p>In the early hours of Saturday, Mr. Beshear said that at least 50 people were killed, and that the death toll was likely to increase to upward of 70 in the coming hours as the sun rises and the authorities across the state begin to get a firmer sense of the storms’ wrath.</p> <p>“Daybreak is going to bring more tough news,” Mr. Beshear said at a briefing.</p> <p>Already, rescuers in counties across the state had mobilized, contending with darkness, powerful wind and driving rain to try to find people trapped in collapsed houses and buildings.</p>

Some of the worst destruction was centered in Mayfield, a town of nearly 10,000 people in the state's western corner. At least 110 people were huddled inside a candle factory in the area when a tornado ripped through.

"We believe we'll lose at least dozens of those individuals," Mr. Beshear said.

About 60,000 people in the state were without power as of Saturday morning, according to PowerOutage.us, and officials said the storms' devastation was likely to become some of the worst the state has endured.

The storms also caused a freight train to derail, although no injuries were reported.

The freight railroad company CSX said that initial reports, including from a police department in the city of Madisonville in western Kentucky, indicated that several rail cars on one of its trains had derailed after the train was stopped amid severe weather.

"There are no reported injuries to the crew," Cindy Schild, a CSX spokeswoman, said in a statement after midnight. "CSX personnel are on route to the scene and will coordinate with local emergency responders to assess the situation."

Michael E. Dossett, the director of the Kentucky Division of Emergency Management, said the number of storms could surpass the 1974 super outbreak of tornadoes. He also said that the length of one tornado's track could rival that of the 1925 tornado outbreak that killed hundreds as it cut a path through Southern and Midwestern states.

"It is a significant, massive disaster event," Mr. Dossett said.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 Germany: health workers vaccination</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/10/world/americas/germany-joins-growing-list-of-nations-mandating-vaccination-for-health-workers.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/10/world/americas/germany-joins-growing-list-of-nations-mandating-vaccination-for-health-workers.html</a>
GIST	<p>German lawmakers voted on Friday to make coronavirus vaccines obligatory for health care workers — a significant move in a nation where protests against pandemic restrictions have been widespread.</p> <p>The mandate, which will go into effect in mid-March, comes after <a href="#">the country last week announced a lockdown on those who are unvaccinated</a>, and as nations across Europe have reintroduced measures meant to control the spread of the coronavirus. The efforts have taken on added urgency as scientists race to understand the risks posed by the recently detected Omicron variant.</p> <p>Although initial reports suggest Omicron spreads faster than previous variants, there are some early signs that it may cause mostly mild illness, but that observation was based mainly on cases in South Africa among younger people, who are generally less likely to become severely ill from Covid. There are also early indications that at least some vaccines will continue to work, though possibly at diminished levels.</p> <p>Germany joins a number of European nations in mandating vaccination for health care workers, including <a href="#">France</a> and <a href="#">Italy</a>, which were among the first.</p> <p>In November, the British government announced that all frontline health workers in England <a href="#">must be vaccinated against Covid-19</a> by the spring to keep their jobs.</p> <p>The Biden administration issued three mandates <a href="#">in September</a> — one for federal contractors, another for health care workers and a third for companies with more than 100 employees. But the broad vaccine mandates affecting the private sector have been <a href="#">delayed by courts</a>.</p> <p>Austria has gone the furthest of any Western democracy, <a href="#">requiring Covid vaccinations for all adults</a>.</p>

	More than 69 percent of the German population is fully vaccinated, but the rate of daily vaccinations has recently increased to levels not seen since the early summer.
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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Jitters: Russia-Ukraine sea encounter</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/10/world/europe/ukraine-russia-war-naval-vessel.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/10/world/europe/ukraine-russia-war-naval-vessel.html</a>
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine — It is a sign of the heightened tensions between Russia and Ukraine that for a few hours this week, a meandering, half-century-old Ukrainian naval ship seemed as if it could spark a worrisome military escalation.</p> <p>The ship, according to Ukrainian officials, was unarmed and involved in a simple training exercise on Thursday in a small but strategic waterway bordered by Ukraine to the west and Russia to the east. It seemed to be primarily an example of the Ukrainian navy’s decrepitude, though it’s possible that Ukraine, too, could have been trying to push the boundaries and provoke Russia.</p> <p>Either way, the Russian security services and state news media quickly seized on the encounter, portraying it as an imminent threat.</p> <p>Russia’s domestic spy service, the F.S.B., announced late in the evening that it had intercepted the ship for failing to obey orders. That set off the Kremlin’s propagandists, who played up the move as a prelude to war. RT, a Russian government television station, began livestreaming coverage on YouTube under the headline “UKRAINIAN PROVOCATION,” with a military analyst suggesting the ship should be blown out of the water.</p> <p>“This is the provocation everyone has been waiting for,” Andrei Medvedev, an RT contributor, wrote.</p> <p>In the end, it was not, as the vessel returned to port without incident.</p> <p>A lumbering ship may not yet be enough to provoke a full-on Russian assault. But with Moscow having amassed nearly 100,000 troops on Ukraine’s borders, along with tanks, fighter aircraft and ballistic missiles, people on all sides of the conflict are jumpy.</p> <p>The brief flare-up not only underscores the dangers inherent in the conflict between Ukraine and Russian-backed separatists, but also suggests that the situation remains volatile even after a video call this week between President Biden and President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia aimed at ratcheting down tensions.</p> <p>Mr. Putin’s rhetoric on Ukraine has become increasingly ominous. And Ukrainian troops are arrayed along a 250-mile barricade of trenches and fortifications that regularly erupts in machine gun and artillery fire as they face off against the separatists in the Donbass region of Eastern Ukraine.</p> <p>Much is riding on diplomatic efforts in the next days and weeks, experts said.</p> <p>“I think that it’s obviously tense, but it’s not like we’re ready to roll,” said Eugene Rumer, the director of the Russia and Eurasia program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.</p> <p>Mr. Rumer raised the possibility that, once Russia made a decision to invade, it could use a minor incident as justification.</p> <p>“If Putin realizes this conversation with Biden is not going anywhere, that he’s not getting what he wants, that this is hopeless, then I can imagine that a drone incident or a shell that somebody lobs could provide the pretext to pull the trigger,” he said.</p> <p>Indeed, the decision by the F.S.B. to intercept a seemingly harmless ship, combined with the furious reaction from the Kremlin’s propagandists, has unnerved both Ukrainian and Western officials, who fear that it serves as a model for how the Kremlin could use a contrived excuse to invade.</p>

Ukrainian observers said they found the timing of the F.S.B.'s announcement suspicious. It came out around the time the government released the details of a telephone call between Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, and President Biden.

In a statement on Twitter, the United States Embassy in Kyiv delivered an unusually pointed response, saying that the Ukrainian ship did nothing illegal and accusing the Russian government of intentionally ginning up a controversy.

"Russia's false allegations are part of its ongoing campaign to distract from its latest aggressive, provocative action," the embassy wrote.

The ship — named Donbas, after the heart of the separatist territory — was intercepted in the Sea of Azov near the Kerch Strait, a narrow passage near Russian-occupied Crimea over which Ukraine and Russia have repeatedly clashed. In 2018, Russian forces opened fire on several Ukrainian naval vessels and arrested a number of sailors, who they accused of straying into territorial waters that the Kremlin claimed as its own after the annexation of Crimea.

The F.S.B. said the Donbas had refused to obey orders to divert from a course leading to the Kerch Strait. "These actions represent a threat to the safety of navigation," its statement said.

According to Ukrainian officials, the ship never came closer than 18 nautical miles from the disputed waterway.

Ukrainian and Western officials say that the Russian authorities, including Mr. Putin himself, seem to be previewing their rationalizations for an invasion. This month, Antony J. Blinken, the U.S. secretary of state, warned that Russia had "intensified disinformation to paint Ukraine as the aggressor to justify pre-planned military action."

These efforts appeared to continue even after the video call between Mr. Putin and Mr. Biden.

In defiance of all evidence to the contrary, Mr. Putin on Thursday accused the Ukrainian authorities of carrying out "a genocide" against the residents of the Donbas. Though civilians in the separatist territories live under the protection of Russian-backed military forces, Margarita Simonyan, the editor in chief of RT and one of the Kremlin's chief propagandists, immediately amplified the claims, suggesting she hoped Russia would come to the residents' rescue.

"Mother Russia has more than once saved millions from different forms of genocide," she wrote on Telegram.

"I don't know if he had that in mind," she said of Mr. Putin, "but I certainly hope he did."

The bellicose statements come against the backdrop of continuing violence along the so-called line of control separating Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed separatists. On Thursday, two Ukrainian service members were wounded in attacks on front line positions, the country's military's press service reported.

Meanwhile, the buildup of Russian troops on the border shows no sign of abating. Russia's Defense Ministry announced that tank divisions from the western military district had practiced taking out anti-tank rockets similar to the Javelins provided by the United States and now deployed by Ukrainian forces in the country's east. The exercises were held at training grounds in the Voronezh region, less than 200 miles from the Russia-Ukraine border.

Valery V. Gerasimov, the chief of the Russian general staff, warned in remarks to military attachés on Thursday that worsening tensions in the region could force Russia to respond. In his statement he specifically mentioned Russia's opposition to the Javelins, which Ukrainian forces have not yet used on

	<p>the battlefield, as well as Turkish-made Bayraktar drones, which have been used to attack separatists' positions.</p> <p>“Any provocation by the Ukrainian authorities to solve the problems of Donbas using force will be suppressed,” he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Vaccines trickle to Africa; challenges exist</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/11/health/covid-vaccine-africa.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/11/health/covid-vaccine-africa.html</a>
GIST	<p>NGWERERE, Zambia — Four people turned up at a health clinic tucked in a sprawl of commercial maize farms on a recent morning, looking for Covid-19 vaccines. The staff had vials of the Johnson &amp; Johnson vaccine stashed in the fridge. But the staff members apologetically declined to vaccinate the four and suggested they try another day.</p> <p>A vial of the Johnson &amp; Johnson vaccine holds five doses, and the staff was under orders not to waste a single one.</p> <p>Ida Musonda, the nurse who supervises the vaccination effort, suspected that her team might have found more takers if they packed the vials in Styrofoam coolers and headed out to markets and churches. “But we have no fuel for the vehicle to take the vaccines there,” she said.</p> <p>They did vaccinate 100 people on their last trip to a farm; the records from that trip sat in a paper heap in the clinic because the data manager had no internet connection to access an electronic records system.</p> <p>For months, the biggest challenge to vaccinating Africans against Covid, and protecting both the continent and the world from the emergence of dangerous variants, has been supply: A continent of about 1.4 billion people has received just 404 million doses of vaccine, and only 7.8 percent of the population is fully vaccinated.</p> <p>But as supply has begun to sputter into something like a more reliable flow, other daunting obstacles are coming into focus. All of them are on view at and around Ngwerere.</p> <p>Weak health care systems with limited infrastructure and technology, and no experience vaccinating adults, are trying to get shots into the arms of people who have far more pressing priorities. At the same time, the global flow of information, and deliberate misinformation, on social media is generating the same skepticism that has stymied vaccination efforts in the United States and other countries.</p> <p>Some Zambians are hesitant, but others have an attitude that could better be described as vaccine indifference. This is a poor country where the economy has contracted sharply during the pandemic, and many unvaccinated people are more focused on putting food on the table.</p> <p>“I’d like to get it but I work Monday to Saturday, and I don’t know if they vaccinate on Sunday,” said Bernadette Kawango, who supports a large extended family with her wages from an auto-parts store in a low-income neighborhood on the edge of Lusaka, the capital. She has heard many rumors: that people who receive the vaccine will die in two years; that the vaccine is part of a plot by Europeans to kill Africans and take their land; that Bill Gates is on a campaign to reduce the world population.</p> <p>Such stories make her roll her eyes. But Covid is not at the top of her list of health care worries. “It’s cholera season, and people have malaria, and there is H.I.V. and TB,” she said. She does not know anyone who has been diagnosed with Covid.</p> <p>All these challenges create two major problems. First, the pace of vaccination is far too slow to prevent unnecessary deaths in a fourth wave, which is already beginning in southern Africa, or to prevent the emergence of new variants such as Omicron, which was first identified in South Africa late last month.</p>

The vaccines now in stock — many of them donations close to their expiration dates when they arrive — may not be used before they must be destroyed.

Second, the push to vaccinate against Covid is drawing resources from health systems that can hardly spare them, which could lead to disastrous consequences for the fight against other devastating health problems.

At the Ngwerere health clinic, the usual bustle and screeching at the mother-and-child health area, where babies are monitored for signs of malnutrition and given childhood immunizations, was absent because everyone on that staff had been repurposed as Covid vaccinators.

“Every time we have a wave here it really threatens the investments that have been made in H.I.V., maternal and child health, and TB and malaria, and it’s important that we protect those,” said Dr. Simon Agolory, who runs the large Zambia program of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Dr. Andrew Silumesii, the director of public health for Zambia’s health ministry, said there was already clear evidence that infant growth monitoring and childhood immunization had declined over the course of the pandemic. He worries that malaria, TB and H.I.V. infections will also increase.

So far, 7 percent of Zambians, some five million people, have been vaccinated against Covid. President Hakainde Hichilema has set a target of vaccinating another two million by Christmas, and 70 percent of the population by the third quarter of 2022, a goal that looks exceedingly ambitious.

Zambia’s vaccines come mostly from Covax, the global vaccine-sharing initiative, with additional donations from China and the African Union. The fact that Zambia is dependent largely on donations means that it must adapt its program to whatever shipments arrive — a bit like making a meal with whatever arrives in a farm subscription box. The country is managing distribution of five different vaccines, each with different dosing regimens, storage requirements and vial volumes.

That has created a huge additional administrative burden for skeleton staffs such as Ms. Musonda’s team. Her staff has no budget for cellphone calls to remind people about second shots, and the effect can be seen in the charts stapled on the vaccination room wall: Of the 840 people who received a first dose of AstraZeneca in April, only 179 came back for a follow-up shot in July.

When Zambia experienced a severe third Covid wave earlier this year, the media coverage of people dying in the parking lots of hospitals that ran out of oxygen rattled a population that had been thinking of the virus as something that affected only white or rich people. There were pre-dawn lineups outside vaccination sites that couldn’t keep shots in stock.

But when the wave abated, so did the demand.

Many people here recall the time when Zambians were dying of AIDS in huge numbers and Western pharmaceutical companies refused to produce affordable lifesaving medications. There is skepticism now that those same companies have come offering free solutions.

Vaccine misinformation spreads on TikTok and WhatsApp, and in evangelical churches where pastors warn that the shot “contains the mark of the beast.”

“No matter how educated people are, if their pastor says don’t trust the vaccine, they don’t trust,” said Dr. Morton Zuze, the clinical care coordinator at Chongwe District Hospital, where seven staff members sat idle in an empty vaccination tent.

As in the United States, there are false rumors in Zambia that the vaccine causes female infertility or erectile dysfunction. Zambians have heard AstraZeneca is not being used in many countries because of reports of blood clots in a very small number of people who received that shot. “It’s a global village and everyone can switch on CNN,” Dr. Zuze added.

Zambia normally vaccinates only small children, and it has no primary care practices. An adult goes to a clinic only when pregnant or receiving H.I.V. treatment, or in an emergency.

Dr. Lawrence Mwananyanda, an assistant professor with the Boston University School of Public Health and a special adviser to President Hichilema, said the government must balance between trying to create vaccine demand and not creating too much, when it can't be sure if it will have the supply to deliver.

"To just walk up — and these health facilities are sometimes very far away, two, five, seven kilometers away and people don't have cars, you have to be very motivated — sometimes people have gone to a health facility and then there is no vaccine," he said. "All they are told is, 'You can only vaccinate if there's five or six people, so you can't be vaccinated today'. How likely are you to come back?"

Charity Machika was vaccinated recently at a rural health center in Chongwe District. She went to the clinic for a prenatal checkup and then was encouraged to head to the next building, where the H.I.V. treatment center was repurposed for vaccinations. "I was scared because people say a lot of stories, that I will faint, that I will not be able to walk, that I will die," she said. "I took the risk to come and protect myself and my baby."

She is the only vaccinated person in her family. Her husband tried twice but the sites he went to never had vaccines in stock, and it was difficult for him to find the time to make the four-kilometer walk to try again, she said.

Felix Mwanza, a veteran H.I.V. activist in Lusaka, said the government had yet to tap into the vast network of H.I.V. and TB treatment activists in the country. "We seem not to learn from our past," he said, recalling how testing and treatment for H.I.V. only reached critical mass when care was delivered in bars, at schools and on doorsteps.

"If they don't use the structures we already have, donors will keep sending the vaccines and they'll pile up here and expire and then they won't send us anymore," he said.

Dr. Mwananyanda said the key strategy for the planned rapid scale-up in vaccination was to do exactly that, taking vaccines to people in malls and at bus stops.

Amid the scramble, no one is thinking about what happens next. "We're really just addressing the vaccination problems for now — but we don't have a system for the long run," said Dr. Agolory with the C.D.C. "And what are we going to do when boosters are needed or if there's some new variants that escape the vaccine altogether, and we need to start from zero and give people more vaccines?"

Zambia will need help procuring more, and it will need funding to help bring on temporary health care workers to administer vaccines so that existing programs, like the Ngwerere mother-and-child clinic, are not abandoned, Dr. Agolory said.

Even with a huge boost in vaccination rates, the country won't have enough coverage to blunt the coming wave, or, most likely, the one after it.

"I am hoping that we keep receiving vaccines so that we don't get into a situation where people need vaccines and they can't get them," said Dr. Silumesii of the health ministry. "The flip side, which is something that I would really hate to see happen, is where we have brought in vaccines and we don't have enough demand and vaccines go to waste. These are vaccines that cost a lot. Definitely that pinch would sting so badly."

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HEADLINE	12/10 Despite vax, omicron spreads in Britain
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/10/health/britain-omicron.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/10/health/britain-omicron.html</a>



The first real-world study of how vaccines hold up against the Omicron variant showed a significant drop in protection against symptomatic cases caused by the new and fast-spreading form of the coronavirus.

But the study, [published by British government scientists on Friday](#), also indicated that third vaccine doses provided considerable defense against Omicron.

Government scientists on Friday also [offered the most complete look yet](#) at how quickly Omicron was spreading in England's highly vaccinated population, warning that the variant could overtake Delta by mid-December and, without any precautionary measures, cause Covid-19 cases to soar.

Four months after people received a second dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, the shots were roughly 35 percent effective in preventing symptomatic infections caused by Omicron, a significant drop-off from their performance against the Delta variant, the scientists found.

A third dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, though, lifted the figure to roughly 75 percent.

Two doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine appeared to offer virtually no protection against symptomatic infection caused by Omicron several months after vaccination. But for those recipients, an additional Pfizer-BioNTech dose paid big dividends, boosting effectiveness against the variant to 71 percent.

Still, the study's authors said they expected that the vaccines would remain a bulwark against hospitalizations and deaths, if not infections, caused by Omicron. And the researchers cautioned that even in a country tracking the variant as closely as Britain is, it was too early to know precisely how well the vaccines would perform.

That study was released alongside new findings about how easily Omicron is managing to spread. Someone infected with the Omicron variant, for example, is roughly three times as likely as a person infected by the Delta variant to pass the virus to other members of his or her household, Britain's Health Security Agency reported.

And a close contact of an Omicron case is roughly twice as likely as a close contact of someone infected with Delta to catch the virus.

Neil Ferguson, an epidemiologist at Imperial College London, said that Omicron's ability to evade the body's immune defenses accounted for most of its advantage over previous variants. But modeling work by his research team and other groups in Britain also suggested that Omicron was simply more contagious than Delta, by roughly 25 to 50 percent.

"I think that there's a significant amount of immune escape," Dr. Ferguson said, referring to the virus's ability to dodge the body's defenses. "But it's also more intrinsically transmissible than Delta."

He and other scientists have cautioned that evidence was still coming in, and that better surveillance in places where the Omicron wave is most advanced could affect their findings.

The World Health Organization said this week that some evidence had emerged that Omicron was causing milder illness than Delta, but that it was too early to be certain. Still, scientists have warned that if the variant keeps spreading as quickly as it is in England, where cases are doubling every 2.5 days, health systems around the world may be deluged with patients.

Even if Omicron causes severe illness at only half the rate of the Delta variant, Dr. Ferguson said, computer modeling suggested that 5,000 people could be admitted to hospitals daily in Britain at the peak of its Omicron wave — a figure higher than any seen at any other point in the pandemic.

Scientists said that widespread vaccination in countries like Britain and the United States would keep as many people from dying as have in earlier waves. But the experts also warned that patients with Covid and with other illnesses would suffer if hospitals became too full.

“It only requires a small drop in protection against severe disease for those very large numbers of infections to translate into levels of hospitalization we can’t cope with,” Dr. Ferguson said.

It will take several weeks to understand how the current surge in Omicron infections may translate into people needing hospital care. “I’m concerned that by the time we know about severity,” Dr. Ferguson said, “it may be too late to act.”

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HEADLINE	12/10 New US-Israel tensions emerge over Iran
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/10/us/politics/iran-nuclear-us-israel-biden-bennett.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/10/us/politics/iran-nuclear-us-israel-biden-bennett.html</a>
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — Long-running differences over how to deal with Iran’s nuclear program have erupted into new tensions between the Biden administration and Israel, with two senior Israeli officials leaving Washington this week concerned that the Americans’ commitment to restoring the 2015 nuclear deal will lead to a flawed agreement allowing Tehran to speed ahead with its nuclear enrichment program.</p> <p>The strains were evident all week, as the Biden administration sought to bring the alliance with Israel into a united front about how to deal with Iran over the next year.</p> <p>In an effort to close the gap, American officials let out word this week that two months ago, Mr. Biden asked his national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, to review the Pentagon’s revised plan to take military action if the diplomatic effort collapsed. Administration officials also outlined new efforts to tighten, rather than loosen, sanctions on Iran.</p> <p>Mr. Biden’s focus on military options and sanctions was an effort to signal to Tehran that the United States was running out of patience with Iranian foot-dragging in the nuclear negotiations in Vienna, administration officials said. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said last week that the new Iranian government “does not seem to be serious about doing what’s necessary to return to compliance” with the 2015 nuclear deal.</p> <p>But the tougher line was also aimed at calming increasingly frustrated Israeli officials. Though they will not criticize the American president in public the way former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu did during the Obama administration, Israeli officials in private argue that the Iranians are advancing their nuclear program while betting that the United States, eager to diminish American commitments in the Middle East, will not abandon the Vienna talks for more forceful action.</p> <p>This article is based on discussions with more than a dozen American and Israeli officials who spoke on the condition they be granted anonymity to discuss both sensitive matters of diplomacy and classified intelligence assessments.</p> <p>After a tense phone call with Mr. Blinken 10 days ago, the Israeli prime minister, Naftali Bennett, dispatched his defense minister, Benny Gantz, and the new head of the Mossad, David Barnea, to Washington this week armed with new intelligence about Iranians’ uranium enrichment and the work of what Israel says is their weapons group. Despite the tougher American talk, Israeli officials left worried that the diplomatic outreach to Iran would continue.</p> <p>The disagreement over Iran is just one of several issues troubling the Biden-Bennett relationship. The pair started off on a strong footing: Mr. Biden spoke with Mr. Bennett within hours after the Israeli leader took office in June — a signal of support given that Mr. Biden had taken weeks after his inauguration to speak directly with Mr. Bennett’s predecessor, Mr. Netanyahu.</p> <p>But the two governments have since clashed on whether the U.S. should reopen the American consulate to the Palestinians in Jerusalem, which was closed by President Donald J. Trump. Mr. Bennett says such a move would undermine Israel’s sovereignty in its capital city.</p>

There are also disagreements over Israeli plans to expand its settlements in the occupied West Bank, and over the Biden administration's decision to blacklist two Israeli spyware firms, NSO Group and Candiru, whose products, the U.S. alleges, have been used by authoritarian governments to hack the phones of dissidents and rights activists.

But at the heart of the tensions between Israel and the United States is the fundamental disagreement over how to stop the Iranian program. It is not a new argument: The two allies fought bitterly over the 2015 agreement, which Israel opposed and President Barack Obama signed.

More recently, they have disagreed about the wisdom of Israeli sabotage of Iranian facilities, which Mr. Bennett's government believes has set back the program, and which some in the United States argue only encourages the Iranians to build back the nuclear enrichment facilities with more efficient, up-to-date equipment.

Israeli officials had been happy with the warm welcome the White House offered Mr. Bennett. The Biden administration had praised his government for being far more transparent with it than Mr. Netanyahu had been. Indeed, the Israelis consulted with the Americans before launching two covert strikes against Iran, one in September against a missile base and one in June against an Iranian factory building nuclear centrifuges, according to people briefed on the actions.

But the call between Mr. Bennett and Mr. Blinken last week was contentious, with the two sides embracing very different opinions about the value of a renewed agreement to check Tehran's nuclear ambitions. The call left officials in both countries frustrated, according to officials from both countries.

During the phone call, Mr. Bennett said that Iran was trying to blackmail the United States by increasing the enrichment percentage, according to an official familiar with details of the call. Mr. Bennett added that no official, American or Israeli, wants to be the one to report that Iran has reached bomb-grade enrichment, but fears of a nuclear-armed Iran should not lead to surrendering to Iranian demands or signing a reckless agreement.

Some American officials believe those concerns about concessions are misplaced. Israeli officials had complained that the United States was considering offering an interim deal with Tehran that would roll back some sanctions in return for a freeze on some of its nuclear activity. But American officials say such an offer is not actively being considered, at least for now, because of Iran's unwillingness to engage.

Israeli officials have not been reassured. They are increasingly concerned that the United States will eventually reach a deal with Tehran and then seek to block Israeli intelligence services from carrying out covert sabotage attacks. Israeli leaders say they want a guarantee from the Biden administration that Washington will not seek to restrain their sabotage campaign, even if a renewed nuclear deal is reached.

Disagreements over intelligence assessments about the Iranian nuclear stockpile and bomb-making know-how remain relatively small, mostly focused on how long it would take Iranians to produce a weapon if they get enough bomb-grade nuclear fuel.

But the gulf about the meaning of those assessments is wide. American officials believe that so long as Iran has not moved to develop a bomb it does not have a nuclear military program, since it suspended the existing one after 2003. Israeli officials, on the other hand, believe that Iran has continued a clandestine effort to build a bomb since 2003.

Some Israeli officials believe that their sabotage campaign is having strategic effects and could be one of the reasons Iranians, however tentatively, have returned to Vienna. A senior Israeli intelligence official said the sabotage operations had created crippling paranoia at the top of the Iranian government. The operations, the official said, have caused Tehran to rethink whether it should accelerate the nuclear project.

But even American supporters of the Israeli approach say it is akin to "mowing the grass," a necessary step to keep Iran in check but not one that will ever fully halt Tehran's nuclear research. These American

officials believe that the only durable way to prevent Iran from developing a weapon is to reach an agreement, like the one in 2015, that requires Iran to ship its nuclear fuel out of the country. And that would require significant sanctions relief in return.

In the meetings this week, Israeli officials tried to persuade Washington not to work toward a diplomatic agreement and to instead tighten sanctions. But Israeli officials say they fear that the U.S. is conducting secret back-channel communication with Iran, and that a new round of talks in Vienna will eventually lead to the signing of a deal.

The meetings came against the backdrop of a recent Iranian attack on American forces in Syria, a senior American official said. The Israelis, the official said, had an aggressive attitude on the Iranian threat, related to both the nuclear program and the risk of missile and other weapon proliferation.

But there is a growing American concern that it is just a matter of time before an American service member is killed or wounded by an Iranian proxy drone strike on Mr. Biden's watch. With Iran making clear it will retaliate against American personnel in Syria or Iraq if Israel strikes Iran or its proxies, it complicates strike planning.

In an appearance at The Wall Street Journal's CEO Council on Monday, William J. Burns, the C.I.A. director, raised concerns about the Iranian nuclear work. He said the Iranians were "dragging their feet" on negotiations as they were "making steady advances in their nuclear program, particularly enrichment to 60 percent now as well." That is the closest the Iranians have ever come to bomb-grade fuel, which is usually defined as 90 percent purity.

But, Mr. Burns added, the United States continues to believe that Iran has not made a decision to weaponize its nuclear program.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Tornado direct hit Amazon warehouse</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/11/us/amazon-warehouse-deaths-tornado.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/11/us/amazon-warehouse-deaths-tornado.html</a>
GIST	<p>The police in Edwardsville, Ill., said there were "confirmed fatalities" at an Amazon warehouse after a direct hit from a tornado caused a major portion of the building to collapse on Friday night, leaving "catastrophic damage to a significant portion" of the building.</p> <p>It was not immediately known how many people had died. The police said on Saturday morning that they were notifying next of kin.</p> <p>"Right now, our concern is trying to get people who are trapped," Herbert Simmons, the director of the St. Clair County Emergency Management Agency, said late Friday.</p> <p>The police did not immediately know how many workers were inside the building when the tornado struck around 8:30 p.m. Friday, but Michael Fillback, the Edwardsville police chief, <a href="#">told the St. Louis station KDSK-TV</a> on Saturday morning that the number was not "in the hundreds."</p> <p>Search-and-rescue operations were continuing as responders worked "to ensure that everyone who was working at the time is accounted for," Chief Fillback said. A bus carried several workers to reunite with families in nearby Pontoon Beach, he said.</p> <p>The tornado caused the collapse of a wall the size of a football field at the warehouse, along with the roof above it, <a href="#">according to The Associated Press</a>.</p> <p>"The safety and well-being of our employees and partners is our top priority right now," Richard Rocha, an Amazon spokesman, said in a statement on Friday night, according to The A.P. "We're assessing the situation and will share additional information when it's available."</p>

	Amazon opened two warehouses in Edwardsville, about 25 miles east of St. Louis, in 2016, employing about 2,200 people, The St. Louis Post-Dispatch <a href="#">reported in 2017</a> .
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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Tornado outbreaks in greater clusters?</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/11/us/tornadoes-midwest-south#such-tornado-outbreaks-seem-to-be-occurring-in-greater-clusters-researchers-say">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/11/us/tornadoes-midwest-south#such-tornado-outbreaks-seem-to-be-occurring-in-greater-clusters-researchers-say</a>
GIST	<p>Tornadoes are relatively small, short-lived weather events. And scientists are not yet able to determine whether there is a link between climate change and the frequency or strength of tornadoes, in part because they have a limited data record.</p> <p>But researchers say that in recent years tornadoes seem to be occurring in greater “clusters,” and that a so-called tornado alley in the Great Plains — where most tornadoes occur — appears to be <a href="#">shifting eastward</a>.</p> <p>“This is what we would call a tornado outbreak, where you have a storm system which produces a number of tornadoes over a large geographical area,” Dan Pydynowski, a senior meteorologist with AccuWeather, said on Friday.</p> <p>But such a large and powerful system in December is highly unusual, and something the region usually experiences in May or April.</p> <p>“It’s certainly not unheard of,” he said of tornadoes this late in the year, “but to have an outbreak of this magnitude, with this many tornado reports — it’s a little unusual for this time of year.”</p> <p>Temperatures in Arkansas and Kansas on Friday were “spring weather,” Mr. Pydynowski said. Highs were in the 70s and 80s.</p> <p>“It was unusually warm, and there was moisture in place,” he said, “and you had a strong cold front end. These are the ingredients for big storms in the spring, but not in mid-December.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Deadly string of tornadoes in outbreak</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/article/tornado-storms-weekend.html">https://www.nytimes.com/article/tornado-storms-weekend.html</a>
GIST	<p><b>What happened?</b></p> <p>A tornado outbreak tore through several states on Friday night. At least five were struck, including Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri and Tennessee.</p> <p>The tornadoes were part of a weather system that was wreaking havoc in many parts of the country, causing substantial snowfall across parts of the upper Midwest and western Great Lakes.</p> <p><b>Dozens of people were killed.</b></p> <p>Kentucky’s governor said Saturday morning that at least 50 had been killed in a tornado’s path of over 200 miles, and that the state’s death toll was likely to increase to more than 70 in the coming hours.</p> <p>The storms caused a wall and roof to collapse at an Amazon warehouse in Illinois, leaving workers trapped inside. The authorities confirmed people had died, but did not say how many as of Saturday morning.</p> <p>Officials in Tennessee said three people were killed: two in Lake County and one in Obion County, in the western part of the state.</p> <p>In Arkansas, officials said that at least one person at a nursing home was killed.</p>

	<p>The precise number of people killed and injured was not yet known, and search-and-rescue operations were continuing in several places Saturday morning.</p> <p><b>What's the damage like?</b></p> <p>Officials across the five-state area were still assessing the extent of the damage on Saturday morning. Local news reports and videos on social media showed crumbled buildings and downed trees across the storm's path.</p> <p>As of Saturday morning, more than 132,000 homes were without power in Tennessee, nearly 60,000 in Kentucky, more than 25,000 in Arkansas, nearly 24,000 in Illinois and nearly 10,000 in Missouri, according to reports compiled by <a href="#">PowerOutage.us</a>.</p> <p>The storms also caused a freight train to derail, although no injuries were reported.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 DOH: 790,412 cases, 9554 deaths</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article256504326.html">https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article256504326.html</a>
GIST	<p>The Washington state Department of Health reported 1,535 new COVID-19 cases and 19 deaths Friday.</p> <p>Statewide totals from the illness caused by the coronavirus are 790,412 and 9,554 deaths. Those numbers are up from 788,877 cases and 9,535 deaths as of Thursday. The case total includes 95,795 infections listed as probable. DOH revises previous case and death counts daily.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 King Co. officials: more omicron cases</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://komonews.com/news/coronavirus/five-more-omicron-cases-confirmed-in-king-county-health-officials-say">https://komonews.com/news/coronavirus/five-more-omicron-cases-confirmed-in-king-county-health-officials-say</a>
GIST	<p>King County health officials confirmed five additional cases of Omicron Friday evening as they expect infections from the variant to increase over the next several weeks.</p> <p>Of the five new cases, three people had information available and none were hospitalized. The three people were vaccinated and one had a booster shot, officials said in a release.</p> <p>Health officials said there is no evidence to show these cases are linked to another or connected to the <a href="#">first Omicron case in King County</a>.</p> <p>“Although the Delta variant remains widespread and responsible for the vast majority of cases, Omicron is now circulating and we expect that infections from Omicron will continue to increase over the next month,” said Dr. Jeff Duchin, Health Officer, Public Health – Seattle &amp; King County.</p> <p>COVID-19 poses the greatest threat for serious illness to unvaccinated people. The most important thing to know is that the same layered COVID-19 prevention measures that work for Delta also work for Omicron and other variants. Get vaccinated and boosted when eligible, wear a high-quality, well-fitting face mask, avoid poorly ventilated and crowded indoor spaces, and isolate and get tested if you have symptoms or are exposed to someone with COVID-19.”</p> <p>Whatcom County became the <a href="#">fourth Washington state county with confirmed cases</a> of the omicron variant Friday.</p> <p>In a written statement, county health officials said the unidentified patient is a man in his 30s although officials did not provide information on how the patient may have contracted the new COVID variant that has alarmed federal and local health authorities alike.</p> <p>Officials did not immediately say how they learned of the man's omicron discovery.</p>

HEADLINE	<b>12/10 Whatcom Co. first omicron case detected</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.q13fox.com/news/first-omicron-case-detected-in-whatcom-county">https://www.q13fox.com/news/first-omicron-case-detected-in-whatcom-county</a>
GIST	<p><b>WHATCOM COUNTY, Wash.</b> - The Washington State Department of Health confirmed the first case of the Omicron variant in Whatcom County.</p> <p>The person who tested positive was a vaccinated man in his 30s. He is currently in isolation.</p> <p>DOH first confirmed the arrival of Omicron in Washington on Dec. 4 in Thurston, Pierce and King counties.</p> <p>"The presence of Omicron in our county really highlights the importance of getting vaccinated, and getting a booster," said Whatcom County Health Department's Communicable Disease and Epidemiology Manager Cindy Hollinsworth. "Breakthrough infections happen, but vaccines are still the best defense we have against this virus and all its variants. Masks are the next best defense. And if anyone feels sick, if anyone has a fever, a cough, trouble breathing or any other symptoms of COVID-19, they need to get tested right away, even if they're fully vaccinated. Isolate at home until you get your test result, and call your health care provider."</p>
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## Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 Riot Games job fraud scam targets wallets</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://threatpost.com/riot-games-job-fraud/176950/">https://threatpost.com/riot-games-job-fraud/176950/</a>
GIST	<p>Riot Games, the developer behind League of Legends, has filed a California lawsuit against scammers, whose identities aren't yet known, for ripping off job seekers with the promise of a gig with the company.</p> <p>Usually early in their careers and eager for a chance with a gaming company like Riot, job hunters are either targeted by a cybercriminal posing as a recruiter or with fake ads on popular employment sites like Indeed, Riot's filing explained.</p> <p>(This email) submitted as part of Riot's lawsuit includes a fake listing for a video game artist/illustrator.</p> <p>Then, the applicant is run through an imaginary interview process with questions that seem legit, like, "Why do you want to work at Riot Games?" and, "Honestly describe what kind of working conditions you thrive in."</p> <p>The interview would often be conducted by chat and followed by a quick job offer.</p> <p>To make things extra convincing, the fraudsters used contacts and other communications doctored-up with Riot branding, including convincing looking employment contracts.</p> <p>After the interview, there's just one step left for the interviewee — they are asked to send money for "work equipment" like an iPad, which the interviewer assures the new hire will be refunded. Spoiler: they aren't going to be.</p> <p>Riot included copies of checks sent to the fraudsters by victims in its complaint, ranging from \$2,400 to \$4,300.</p> <p>Riot wasn't the only prominent gaming company used to lure in victims, Polygon reportedly heard from people approached by fake representatives of Rockstar Games and Manticore Games, according to its report.</p>



“[The scam] is absolutely appalling,” Riot’s lawyers wrote in the complaint. “Their victims largely are young, naïve, and want nothing more than to work for Riot, one of the most prestigious video-game companies in the world. Defendants prey on the hopes and dreams of these individuals in order to steal their identities and pillage their bank accounts.”

Riot Games representatives said in an interview with Polygon that the company isn’t exactly sure how many people have already been [victimized by the phishing campaign](#).

### **Gamers and ‘Dynamite Phishing’**

Phishing lure themes are fickle, and ebb and flow with the latest headlines. COVID-19, [Chipotle offers](#), easy [infrastructure legislation money](#), and now, dream gaming jobs, are all bait intended to illicit an emotional reaction and make otherwise rational people take action without thinking it through.

Last summer, the Threat Intelligence Team at GreatHorn discovered a rise in business email compromise (BEC) attacks that sent X-rated material to people at work to try and trigger an emotional response, something the report called “dynamite phishing.”

“It doesn’t always involve explicit material, but the goal is to put the user off balance, frightened – any excited emotional state – to decrease the brain’s ability to make rational decisions,” according to the report.

A fantasy job at a huge gaming company could certainly trigger a highly emotional response in the right person.

This fake gaming company job scam leverages both the co-called [Great Resignation](#) of 2021, which saw record-breaking numbers of workers looking for better gigs, as well as the [pandemic push to work-from-home](#). Now a call from a personal cell phone number, or a Zoom interview in someone’s kitchen, doesn’t seem all that unusual and fraudsters are taking advantage.

Gaming itself is under relentless attack. Last summer, Akamai Technologies found [attacks on gaming](#) web applications alone jumped by a staggering 340 percent in 2020.

From [Grinchbots](#) scooping up vast swaths of the latest hardware inventory to last month’s [back-to-back PlayStation 5 breaches](#) and [malicious gaming apps](#) lurking in marketplaces, this latest fake job fraud is just another way criminals are trying to exploit the enthusiasm of gamers.

Now Riot hopes to use this lawsuit as a way to track down the cybercriminals and make it clear the company was not behind the scam, according to Riot attorney Dan Nabel.

“We’re upset that people who viewed Riot as their dream company, even if that’s one person, had been defrauded through this scam,” Nabel told Polygon. “Secondarily, we felt a need to protect our employees who are having their identities impersonated.”

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HEADLINE	<b>12/13 Building blocks of Qakbot banking trojan</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/microsoft-details-building-blocks-of.html">https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/microsoft-details-building-blocks-of.html</a>
GIST	<p>Infection chains associated with the multi-purpose Qakbot malware have been broken down into "distinct building blocks," an effort that Microsoft said will help to detect and block the threat in an effective manner proactively.</p> <p>The Microsoft 365 Defender Threat Intelligence Team <a href="#">dubbed</a> Qakbot a "customizable chameleon that adapts to suit the needs of the multiple threat actor groups that utilize it."</p> <p><a href="#">Qakbot</a> is believed to be the creation of a financially motivated cybercriminal threat group known as <a href="#">Gold Lagoon</a>. It is a prevalent information-stealing malware that, in recent years, has become a precursor to</p>

many critical and widespread ransomware attacks, offering a malware installation-as-a-service that enables many campaigns.

First discovered in 2007, the modular malware — like [TrickBot](#) — has [evolved](#) from its early roots as a banking trojan to become a Swiss Army knife capable of data exfiltration and acting as a delivery mechanism for the second stage payloads, including ransomware. Also notable is its tactic of hijacking victims' legitimate email threads from Outlook clients via an Email Collector component and using those threads as phishing lures to infect other machines.

"Compromising IMAP services and email service providers (ESPs), or hijacking email threads allows attackers to leverage the trust a potential victim has in people they have corresponded with before, and it also allows for the impersonation of a compromised organization," Trend Micro researchers Ian Kenefick and Vladimir Kropotov [detailed](#) last month. "Indeed, intended targets will be much more likely to open emails from a recognized sender."

Qakbot activity tracked by the cybersecurity firm over a seven month period between March 25, 2021, and October 25, 2021, show that the U.S., Japan, Germany, India, Taiwan, Italy, South Korea, Turkey, Spain, and France are the top targeted countries, with the intrusions primarily striking telecommunications, technology, and education sectors.

More recently, spam campaigns have resulted in the deployment of a new loader called [SQUIRRELWAFFLE](#) that enables the attackers to gain an initial foothold into enterprise networks and drop malicious payloads, such as Qakbot and Cobalt Strike, on infected systems.

Now according to Microsoft, the attack chains involving Qakbot comprise of several building blocks that chart the various stages of the compromise, right from the methods adopted to distribute the malware — links, attachments, or [embedded images](#) — before carrying out an array of post-exploitation activities such as credential theft, email exfiltration, lateral movement, and the deployment of Cobalt Strike beacons and ransomware.

The Redmond-based company noted that Qakbot-related emails sent by the attackers may, at times, come with a ZIP archive file attachment that includes a spreadsheet containing [Excel 4.0 macros](#), an initial access vector that's widely abused in phishing attacks. Regardless of the mechanism employed to deliver the malware, the campaigns have in common their use of malicious Excel 4.0 macros.

While macros are turned off by default in Microsoft Office, recipients of the email messages are prompted to enable the macro to view the document's actual content. This triggers the next phase of the onslaught to download the malicious payloads from one or more attacker-controlled domains.

More often than not, Qakbot is just the first step in what's part of a larger attack, with the threat actors using the initial foothold facilitated by the malware to install additional payloads or sell the access to the highest bidder on underground forums who can then leverage it for their own ends. In June 2021, enterprise security company Proofpoint [revealed](#) how ransomware actors are increasingly shifting from using email messages as an intrusion route to purchasing access from cybercriminal enterprises that have already infiltrated major entities.

"Qakbot's modularity and flexibility could pose a challenge for security analysts and defenders because concurrent Qakbot campaigns could look strikingly different on each affected device, significantly impacting how these defenders respond to such attacks," the researchers said. "Therefore, a deeper understanding of Qakbot is paramount in building a comprehensive and coordinated defense strategy against it."

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HEADLINE	12/10 Ransomware groups still target healthcare
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SOURCE	<a href="https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/cybercrime/ransomware-groups-dont-abide-by-promises-not-to-target-healthcare">https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/cybercrime/ransomware-groups-dont-abide-by-promises-not-to-target-healthcare</a>
GIST	<p>It may not be wise to count on criminals to self-regulate.</p> <p>That is one implication of a new <a href="#">CyberPeace Institute blog</a> researching ransomware groups whose wares have been used in attacks on healthcare facilities since May 2020. Of the 39 groups they have tracked, 12 had previously issued statements saying they would not target healthcare.</p> <p>CyberPeace Institute tracks healthcare attacks on their <a href="#">Cyber Incident Tracer (CIT) #HEALTH</a> site.</p> <p>Some healthcare facilities may have been hit by accident — a strike on a university hospital when actors thought they were targeting a university. Others may have been a single affiliate working against the wishes of the ransomware platform or a platform that itself does not care. Bernhard Schneider, an analyst with the institute who wrote the blog post, told SC that, in the end, it does not really matter.</p> <p>"Even if such a mistake does happen, and they did provide the decryption key, the hospital's still out of work. Many of its systems are still disrupted for weeks afterwards," Schneider said. "Even if there is no malicious intent behind it, even if you provide the decryption key, the damage is done."</p> <p>LockBit, which hosts documents from the second-highest number of healthcare victims of the groups profiled on its leaks site, claims not to allow affiliates to target healthcare.</p> <p>Healthcare can make a tempting target for ransomware actors, who are keenly aware of the life or death stakes a medical facility would face not paying a ransom. The <a href="#">FIN12 affiliate group</a> profiled by Mandiant are known to target healthcare, and CyberPeace Institute found five ransomware platforms that had explicitly released statements saying they would target healthcare or promoted them as a target in their forums.</p> <p>Ransomware groups have made claims about which victims they will and will not allow typically after high-profile incidents threaten to bring law enforcement down upon them. After <a href="#">the Colonial Pipeline attacks</a>, for example, DarkSide announced it would no longer allow its affiliates to target critical infrastructure. <a href="#">DarkSide shut down</a> in the fracas following the Colonial attack only to <a href="#">relaunch as BlackMatter</a>, a group whose affiliates CyberPeace Institute says have targeted healthcare despite policies against it.</p> <p>Ransomware is often framed as a brand reputation industry, given that victims will not pay ransoms to groups who will not return data. But there is no such risk being a brand that does not self-regulate effectively.</p> <p>"Any claims by ransomware groups that they will not target a specific sector are completely worthless," said Allan Liska, a ransomware expert with Recorded Future. "Ransomware actors have shown over and over again that money rules above all else and they will go after any target that is profitable."</p> <p>Schneider noted that the potential divide between a ransomware platform's wishes and its affiliates' practices demonstrates some of the dangers of viewing the ransomware industry as a group of single actors rather than a complex economy.</p> <p>"One of the things that the restaurant operators provide for their affiliates and also one of the reasons why they take such a big share for essentially just maintaining the ransomware is they give these ransomware affiliates a scapegoat," he said. "If law enforcement goes after the ransomware operator, that operator might be dismantled, but an affiliate can just wander off to the next operator and use them as an umbrella."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 Australia govt alarm over Conti ransomware</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/australian-govt-raises-alarm-over-conti-ransomware-attacks/">https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/australian-govt-raises-alarm-over-conti-ransomware-attacks/</a>

GIST	<p>The Australian Cyber Security Centre (ACSC) says Conti ransomware attacks have targeted multiple Australian organizations from various industry verticals since November.</p> <p>"The ACSC is aware of multiple instances of Australian organisations that have been impacted by Conti ransomware in November and December 2021.</p> <p>This activity has happened across multiple sectors. Victims have received demands for ransom payments," Australia's cybersecurity agency warned in a security advisory issued today.</p> <p>"In addition to the encryption of data and subsequent impact to organisations' ability to operate as usual, victims have had data stolen during incidents published by the ransomware actors, including Personally Identifiable Information (PII)."</p> <p>The warning follows a November ransomware attack on Australian electricity provider CS Energy's corporate ICT network mistakenly linked by local media to a Chinese-backed hacking group.</p> <p>However, as CS Energy CEO Andrew Bills revealed, the company didn't "find indication that the cyber incident was a state-based attack."</p> <p>The Conti ransomware gang claimed the attack on November 27, when the Australian energy provider discovered the intrusion. Conti is yet to leak any files stolen from CS Energy.</p> <p>The ACSC also published a <a href="#">ransomware profile</a> with additional info on the Conti gang, including initial access indicators, targeted sectors, and mitigation measures.</p> <p>"The threat actors involved in the deployment of the Conti ransomware frequently change attack patterns, and quickly take advantage of newly disclosed vulnerabilities to compromise and operate within networks before network owners are able to apply patches or mitigations," the agency <a href="#">added</a>.</p> <p>"Conti affiliates have been observed targeting entities in critical sectors, notably including healthcare organisations. In 2021, Conti claimed to have compromised at least 500 organisations worldwide on their TOR site."</p> <p>The ACSC provides <a href="#">mitigations focused on Conti TTPs</a> (Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures), including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• enabling multifactor authentication (MFA) to block the use of stolen credentials</li> <li>• encrypting sensitive data at rest to block sensitive info exfiltration</li> <li>• segmenting corporate networks and restricting admin privileges to block privilege escalation attempts and lateral movement</li> <li>• maintaining daily backups to reduce attacks' impact</li> </ul> <p>The agency previously warned of an <a href="#">increase in LockBit 2.0 ransomware attacks</a> targeting Australian orgs starting with July 2021.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/12 FTC: \$148M lost to gift card scams this year
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/ftc-americans-lost-148-million-to-gift-card-scams-this-year/">https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/ftc-americans-lost-148-million-to-gift-card-scams-this-year/</a>
GIST	<p>The US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) said Americans reported losing \$148 million to gift card scams during the first nine months of 2021, following a significant increase compared to last year.</p> <p>Almost 40,000 consumers reported falling victim to scams where gift cards were the chosen form of payment throughout the year.</p> <p>The \$148 million lost to scammers until the end of September 2021 amounts to more than the total losses reported in 2020.</p>

	<p>This type of scam payments has increased every year during the last three years, now reaching staggering numbers both in the number of reports and the total amount of losses.</p> <p>"Since 2018, both the numbers of consumers filing reports in which gift cards were the form of payment to scammers and the amount they have reported lost have increased steadily," the FTC <a href="#">said</a>.</p> <p>"The FTC has resources for consumers, including information on how to contact gift card companies to try to stop payments to scammers at <a href="https://ftc.gov/giftcards">ftc.gov/giftcards</a>."</p> <p><b>Target gift cards, a scammer's top choice</b></p> <p>While Google Play, Apple, eBay, and Walmart gift cards have remained popular options for scammers, they now switched to asking for Target gift cards which are now their most popular choice.</p> <p>"Most gift card scams start with a phone call from someone impersonating a branch of the government like the Social Security Administration, or a business," the US government agency added.</p> <p>"The caller might threaten to freeze your bank account and tell you that you must buy gift cards to avoid arrest or to keep access to your money in your bank account."</p> <p>The most important thing to remember if you don't want to fall victim to a gift card scam is that gift cards are meant to be used to get gifts, NOT to make payments.</p> <p>If someone calling from a government agency or a bank says you have to pay taxes to avoid arrest or pay off an unknown debt to keep access to your bank account, they are always a scammer.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 Volvo Cars discloses security breach</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/volvo-cars-discloses-security-breach-leading-to-randd-data-theft/">https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/volvo-cars-discloses-security-breach-leading-to-randd-data-theft/</a>
GIST	<p>Swedish carmaker Volvo Cars has disclosed that unknown attackers have stolen research and development information after hacking some of its servers.</p> <p>"Volvo Cars has become aware that one of its file repositories has been illegally accessed by a third party," the company disclosed today.</p> <p>"Investigations so far confirm that a limited amount of the company's R&amp;D property has been stolen during the intrusion. Volvo Cars has earlier today concluded, based on information available, that there may be an impact on the company's operation."</p> <p>Volvo said it notified relevant authorities after discovering the incident and is now investigating the data theft together with third-party experts.</p> <p>"The company does not see, with currently available information, that this has an impact on the safety or security of its customers' cars or their personal data," Volvo <a href="#">added</a>.</p> <p><b>Attack claimed by Snatch ransomware</b></p> <p>While the company did not disclose any other details on the breach, the Snatch ransomware gang has already claimed the attack.</p> <p>The ransomware added an entry on their data leak site on November 30 about breaching Volvo Car Corporation's servers and stealing files during the intrusion, together with screenshots of the stolen files as proof.</p> <p>Since then, Snatch has also leaked 35.9 MB of what they claim to be documents stolen from Volvo's servers during the intrusion.</p>

	<p>The company refused to comment after BleepingComputer reached out to Volvo on December 1 for more details regarding the attack claimed by Snatch.</p> <p>"Volvo Cars does not comment on speculation about potential cyber security attacks but takes all potential threats to its cyber security and thefts of its property seriously," Volvo said.</p> <p>"Cyber security is an integral part and a top priority of our global development work and operations. Volvo Cars actively participates in and contributes to the international work on standardisation and best practices, and apply industry-accepted recommendations on cyber security."</p> <p>When BleepingComputer emailed back and asked Volvo to confirm if the screenshots shared as proof by the ransomware gang are of files stolen from its servers, a Volvo spokesperson replied with "We cannot comment any further."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 Karakurt extortion threat; but no ransom</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://threatpost.com/extortion-karakurt-threat-ransomware/176911/?web_view=true">https://threatpost.com/extortion-karakurt-threat-ransomware/176911/?web_view=true</a>
GIST	<p>There is a new financially motivated threat group on the rise and for a change, it doesn't appear to be interested <a href="#">in deploying</a> ransomware or taking out <a href="#">high-profile targets</a>.</p> <p>Researchers from Accenture Security have been tracking a group that calls itself "Karakurt," which means "black wolf" in Turkish and is the name of a venomous spider found in eastern Europe and Siberia.</p> <p>Karakurt focuses on data exfiltration and subsequent extortion, allowing it to move quickly. In fact, since September, it has already hit more than 40 victims, 95 percent of which were in North America with the rest in Europe, researchers <a href="#">revealed in a report</a> published Friday.</p> <p>"The threat group is financially motivated, opportunistic in nature, and so far, appears to target smaller companies or corporate subsidiaries versus the alternative big-game hunting approach," they wrote in the report.</p> <p>Researchers said they expect that Karakurt will turn out to be a bit of a trendsetter and that in the future, other groups will move away from targeting massive corporations or <a href="#">critical-infrastructure providers</a> with ransomware to adopt a similar exfiltration/extortion approach.</p> <p>This is because it "enables faster attack execution and steers clear of intentionally disrupting business operations, yet still yields leverage in terms of data extortion," Accenture's Cyber Investigations, Forensics &amp; Response (CIFR) team told Threatpost in an email.</p> <p><b>Timeline and Initial Intrusion</b></p> <p>Researchers outside of Accenture Security first identified Karakurt in June as it began setting up its infrastructure and data-leak sites, Accenture CIFR researchers told Threatpost. That month, the group registered the sites karakurt.group and karakurt.tech; and created the Twitter handle <a href="#">@karakurtlair</a> in August. Not long after, the group's first successful attack followed.</p> <p>Accenture Security's collection sources and intrusion analysis identified the first victim of the group in September; two months later, the group revealed its victim on the karakurt.group website, researchers said.</p> <p>Karakurt's tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) for infiltrating victim networks, achieving persistence, moving laterally and stealing data are similar to many threat actors, and the group often takes a "living off the land" approach depending on the attack surface, researchers said — i.e., using tools or features that already exist in the target environment.</p>



The group establishes initial access using legitimate VPN credentials, though researchers said it's unclear how they obtain those credentials. "One possibility is exploitation of vulnerable VPN devices, but all cases included inconsistent or absent enforcement of multi-factor authentication (MFA) for user accounts," they wrote in the report.

### Switching Up Tactics

To maintain persistence once accessing a network, Karakurt predominantly uses service creation, remote-management software and distribution of command-and-control (C2) beacons across victim environments using Cobalt Strike.

However, recently the group seems to have switched tactics in its deployment of backup persistence, researchers observed. Instead of deploying Cobalt Strike, Karakurt "persisted within the victim's network via the VPN IP pool or installed AnyDesk to allow external remote access to compromised devices," they wrote. This allows the group to leverage previously obtained user, service and administrator credentials to move laterally.

The group also will use other remote-management tools, remote desktop protocol (RDP), Cobalt Strike and PowerShell commands to move laterally and discover pertinent data to steal and use for extortion purposes as needed, researchers said.

If Karakurt can't elevate privileges using credentials, they turn to either Mimikatz or PowerShell to do so, but only if necessary, researchers observed.

Overall, the group's attack vector so far shows it is nimble enough to modify its tactics depending on the victim's environment, researchers told Threatpost. And because Karakurt often uses valid credentials to access networks, it can manage to evade detection in many cases.

Finally, to steal data, Karakurt uses 7zip and WinZip for compression, as well as Rclone or FileZilla (SFTP) for staging and final exfiltration to Mega.io cloud storage. Staging directories used to exfiltrate data in attacks were C:\Perflogs and C:\Recovery, according to Accenture Security.

### Mitigation Advice

Researchers provided typical mitigation advice to organizations to avoid being compromised and extorted by Karakurt, which will contact companies multiple times to put pressure on them to pay once their data has been taken.

Organizations should maintain best practices like patching across all systems, particular those that face the internet; updating anti-virus software; implementing strict network egress policies; and using application whitelisting where feasible to protect themselves, researchers advised.

Given the group's tendency to use valid credentials, organizations also should make passwords as complex as they can, as well as use MFA whenever possible.

Moreover, they should only use admin accounts for valid administrative purposes and never to connect to the network or browse the internet, and should also enforce them with cross-platform MFA, researchers recommended.

Hunting for attacker TTPs — including common living-off-the-land techniques that Karakurt has used — to proactively detect, respond to and mitigate attacks also is advised.

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HEADLINE	12/12 DHS: new cyber flaw poses 'severe risk'
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/US/cyber-vulnerability-poses-severe-risk-dhs/story?id=81713422">https://abcnews.go.com/US/cyber-vulnerability-poses-severe-risk-dhs/story?id=81713422</a>
GIST	Late Saturday, the Department of Homeland Security Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) issued an urgent statement about a new cyber vulnerability that could touch a wide swath of the internet.



"This vulnerability, which is being widely exploited by a growing set of threat actors, presents an urgent challenge to network defenders given its broad use," CISA Director Jen Easterly said in a statement.

"To be clear, this vulnerability poses a severe risk," Easterly said.

The vulnerability is linked to a commonly used piece of software called Log4j, a utility that runs in the background of many commonly used software applications.

"It's probably one of the most ubiquitous software components on the internet today," Tony Turner, VP of Security Solutions for the cyber-security company Fortress, told ABC News. Turner said the vulnerability impacts everything from gaming systems and consumer platforms to critical infrastructure and the Department of Defense.

"Why this is so important is it is trivial to exploit," Turner said. "Anyone can do this, like teenagers and kids are playing around with this [vulnerability] like it's a game."

Cybersecurity experts inside and outside the government have been working around the clock this weekend to try to get their arms around this problem. "IT security teams around the world have been burning midnight oil all weekend and will continue and this is not a weekend problem, this is a months and months from now problem," Turner said.

Microsoft issued an alert saying the software giant is "monitoring the threat landscape for attacks and developing customer protections."

"Our security teams have been conducting an active investigation of our products and services to understand where Apache Log4j may be used and are taking expedited steps to mitigate any instances," an alert from Microsoft [said](#).

An Amazon Web Services blog post said, "This vulnerability is severe and due to the widespread adoption of Apache Log4j, its impact is large."

Rob Joyce, who serves as the National Security Agency's director of cybersecurity, said in a [tweet](#) the Log4j vulnerability is a "significant threat for exploitation due to the widespread inclusion in software frameworks."

Other countries have also warned of the software vulnerability. Germany [said](#) it is a "very high" threat. Sources say it may be weeks before the vulnerability -- and how it has been exploited -- is better understood.

The problem is that Log4j is widely used and touches large swaths of the internet -- from cell phones to e-commerce to gaming platforms to internet connected devices in homes and offices.

"I think this is bigger than SolarWinds, it's bigger than Colonial [pipeline] or Kaseya. That's just because of the reach just because of the ubiquitous nature and the ease of exploitation here," Turner told ABC News.

"This is probably one of the most important vulnerabilities of all time... we're still trying to understand the ultimate reach of this and I think we're going to be unpacking this for years to come," Turner said.

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HEADLINE	12/12 Fake website offers murder for hire
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/12/us/hireahitman-website-cracks-crimes-cec/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/12/us/hireahitman-website-cracks-crimes-cec/index.html</a>
GIST	(CNN)Wendy Wein wanted her ex-husband dead.

In July of 2020 the Michigan woman came across a website, [Rent-A-Hitman](#), that promised to "handle your delicate situation" privately and in a timely manner.

The site boasts having almost 18,000 field operatives who can do a job anywhere in the United States. It features testimonials from satisfied clients, including a man who wrote that RentAHitman "handled my disgruntled employee issue promptly while I was out of town on vacation."

So Wein filled out a form on the site, seeking consultation for her issue.

"This is kind of weird that your company is not on the deep or dark web," she wrote in a message to a man she believed was the site's chief consultant, Guido Fanelli. CNN obtained a copy of the message. "I prefer not going to jail," she added. "Thanks for your time."

That didn't stop Wein from offering later to pay \$5,000 to have her husband killed.

But there was a problem.

Guido Fanelli is actually Bob Innes, a California man who runs the website. Rent-A-Hitman's "operatives" have never actually killed anybody. Instead, the site exists to dupe people who are looking for hired killers.

And Wein is now headed to prison -- one of several Rent-A-Hitman "clients" who've been found guilty of using the site to solicit a murder.

### **The site's owner turns murderous 'clients' over to police**

What started as a website for an internet security business has turned, by accident, into online bait for people looking to get their enemies killed. Their service requests go to Innes, who hands serious inquiries over to law enforcement.

Innes, who lives in Fairfield, California, says he's left red flags all over his site hinting that it's a trap. For starters, the website openly suggests that it offers illegal services. Its phony testimonials include one from a woman who's "ready to mingle" after she caught her husband cheating with a babysitter.

Its 18,000 "field operatives" are the [estimated number of law enforcement agencies nationwide](#). At the bottom of the site, a link to check if your credit card has been stolen takes users to the FBI's [Internet Crime Complaint Center](#).

Bob Innes, who launched the Rent-A-Hitman site in 2005 to support an internet security business.

And the site promises confidentiality under the "Hitman Information Privacy & Protection Act of 1964," a tongue-in-cheek nod to HIPAA, the real-life Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act which passed in 1996 and protects patients' medical information.

But some people still fall for it, filling out online forms with their real name, contact information and details about who they want "handled."

Innes says more than 400 people have filled service request forms on the site since it launched, including some who have expressed interest in becoming hit men and pranksters trying to play jokes on friends. Of those, roughly 10% turned into legitimate cases where police became involved, he says.

"I thought nobody can be that stupid, and boy have I been proven wrong," says Innes, 54. "These people ... whoever they are, they see HIPAA, they think privacy. So they feel compelled to leave their real information -- names, address, where the intended target is..."

**He gives people 24 hours to cool off before he alerts authorities**

If a person fills out a form on his site and explicitly seeks to have someone killed, Innes will wait 24 hours before contacting police.

"It's kind of like a cooling-off period, to come back to your senses. I want to give people the opportunity to walk away," he says. "After a day, I ask them two questions. Do you still require our services? Do you want to be connected with a field operative?"

If they respond yes to both, Innes connects them with a law enforcement agency in their area, which takes over communications with the suspect. Innes never discusses a fee -- he leaves that to the "field operatives."

"I just play matchmaker with the police," he says. "I'd rather be a state witness than a state conspirator."

When Wein, the Michigan woman, confirmed after 24 hours that she still wanted to hire a killer, Innes turned her information over to Michigan State Police. They sent a state trooper, posing in plainclothes as a hit man, [to meet her in a parking lot](#) in South Rockwood, south of Detroit.

Wendy Wein was arrested last year and now faces up to nine years in prison.

[Police said](#) Wein offered to pay the trooper \$5,000 to kill her ex-husband and provided his home address, place of work and his schedule. State police told CNN she gave the trooper a \$200 down payment for travel expenses because her ex-husband lived in another state.

Wein was arrested and [pleaded guilty last month](#) to charges of solicitation for murder and use of a computer to commit a crime. She faces up to nine years in prison at her sentencing, scheduled for January, says Sgt. Michael Peterson of Michigan State Police, who led the case.

"What stood out the most about this case was the foolishness of the suspect ... attempting to hire a hit man from a website," Peterson says.

### **The site's first serious case involved a requested hit on 3 people**

Innes says he never intended to trap would-be killers when he launched the website in 2005. He was trying to start an internet security business, focusing on web traffic and risk analysis for small networks.

"'Rent' as in hire us, 'hit man' as in website traffic and analytics," he says.

His internet security business never took off, so he tried to sell the domain name. There wasn't much interest from buyers, so he forgot about it and let it sit dormant for years.

Then, one day in 2008, he checked the site's inbox and was stunned.

"There were emails about 'how much for a hit?' 'are you hiring a hit man?'," Innes says. "I didn't know how to respond, frankly, so I shut the email inbox and walked away for a couple of years."

Two years later, another murder-for-hire solicitation hit his inbox.

On its website, Rent-A-Hitman promises confidentiality under the "Hitman Information Privacy & Protection Act of 1964."

"I get an email from a woman saying she needed three people murdered," Innes says. "A few hours later, she sent a second email with the names and addresses of the people she wanted killed."

The woman told Innes she was a British citizen living in Ontario, Canada, and that the three people she wanted killed had stolen her father's inheritance.

Innes says he looked up some of the addresses she provided, and her information seemed to check out.

"She wanted to get even. She was gonna stop at nothing," he says. "I reached out to a friend who was a sergeant and said, 'I think this lady is serious, can we request a welfare check?' The friend notified Canadian authorities."

The woman was arrested and served a few months behind bars for soliciting to commit murder before she was deported to Britain, Innes says.

"That was my first case. I said, 'This \$9.20 website has just prevented three murders.' That was the turning point for the website," Innes says.

So he turned the site into what he calls an "over-the-top parody," complete with the fake HIPAA statement and offers of special discount packages for groups and seniors.

"Rent-A-Hitman is safe, secure, and available right here on the World Wide Web," says the site, which promises to be "your point & click solution."

#### **Another man tried to use the website to kidnap a child**

Innes' website also led to the conviction of a Virginia man who tried to hire someone to kill his ex-girlfriend and her parents in 2018.

The man, Devon Fauber, is mentally disabled and told an officer posing as a hit man that he wanted to kill the three relatives so he could take care of his ex-girlfriend's 3-year-old daughter, [according to a report](#) in The News Leader of Staunton, Virginia.

Devon Fauber, then 21, leaves the Augusta County, Virginia, courthouse in November 2018 after pleading guilty to trying to hire a hitman to kill three people.

"Make sure you kill them and don't kill the baby," Fauber wrote in his online request for a hit man, Innes says. Fauber also asked to have the child kidnapped, along with her birth certificate, from her home in Staunton, according to Innes.

Court records show that Fauber was sentenced in 2019 to 10 years in prison for solicitation to commit first-degree murder.

Despite the publicity such cases bring to his website, Innes says he still gets online requests from people who want to hire a hit man. Some reach out from overseas, asking if he can arrange a hit in a specific country.

He never advertises the website, so he thinks people are probably finding it through online searches. Innes says his website's analytics show it has been viewed in 160 countries.

"That's absolutely mind-boggling," he says.

Innes says he's now trying to educate people about online dangers and calling for tougher laws for people convicted of using the internet to carry out violent crimes.

"This is a work in progress, but if there are any lawmakers, internet safety groups or anyone else that may want to assist in this project, that would be greatly appreciated," he says.

Meanwhile, he'll continue playing matchmaker between murderous clients and police.

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HEADLINE	12/10 Amazon: 'unexpected behavior' in outage
SOURCE	<a href="https://finance.yahoo.com/news/amazon-says-unexpected-behavior-caused-003144464.html">https://finance.yahoo.com/news/amazon-says-unexpected-behavior-caused-003144464.html</a>

GIST	<p>(Bloomberg) -- Amazon.com Inc. said automated processes in its cloud computing business caused cascading outages across the internet this week, affecting everything from Disney amusement parks and Netflix videos to robot vacuums and Adele ticket sales.</p> <p>In a statement Friday, Amazon said the problem began Dec. 7 when an automated computer program -- designed to make its network more reliable -- ended up causing a “large number” of its systems to unexpectedly behave strangely. That, in turn, created a surge of activity on Amazon’s networks, ultimately preventing users from accessing some of its cloud services.</p> <p>“Basically, a bad piece of code was executed automatically and it caused a snowball effect,” Forrester analyst Brent Ellis said. The outage persisted “because their internal controls and monitoring systems were taken offline by the storm of traffic caused by the original problem.”</p> <p>Amazon explained the failure in a highly technical statement posted online. The problems began about 10:30 a.m. New York time on Dec. 7 and lasted several hours before Amazon managed to fix the problem. In the meantime, social media lit up with complaints from consumers angered that their smart home gadgetry and other internet-connected services had suddenly ceased to work.</p> <p>Some experts said the explanation doesn’t help users fully understand what went wrong.</p> <p>“They don’t explain what this unexpected behavior was and they didn’t know what it was. So they were guessing when trying to fix it, which is why it took so long,” said Corey Quinn, cloud economist at Duckbill Group.</p> <p>AWS is generally a reliable service. Amazon’s cloud division last suffered a major incident in 2017, when an employee accidentally turned off more servers than intended during repairs of a billing system. Still, the latest outage reminded the world how many products and services are centralized in common data centers run by just a handful of big tech companies like Amazon, Microsoft Corp. and Alphabet Inc.’s Google.</p> <p>There is no easy fix to the problem. Some analysts believe companies should duplicate their services across multiple cloud computing providers so no one crash puts them out of commission. Others say a “multi-cloud” strategy would be impractical and could make companies even more vulnerable because they would be exposed to everyone’s outages, not just AWS’s.</p> <p>“We know this event impacted many customers in significant ways,” the company said in the jargon-filled statement. “We will do everything we can to learn from this event and use it to improve our availability even further.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Tech giants warn: widespread software flaw</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/tech-giants-microsoft-amazon-and-others-warn-of-widespread-software-flaw-11639260827?mod=hp_lead_pos10">https://www.wsj.com/articles/tech-giants-microsoft-amazon-and-others-warn-of-widespread-software-flaw-11639260827?mod=hp_lead_pos10</a>
GIST	<p>Cybersecurity officials at major tech companies are scrambling to patch a serious flaw in a widely used piece of internet software that security experts warn could unleash a new round of cyberattacks.</p> <p>The bug, hidden in an obscure piece of server software called Log4j, has prompted investigations into the depth of the problem within <a href="#">Amazon.com</a> Inc., <a href="#">AMZN -1.12%</a> <a href="#">Twitter</a> Inc. <a href="#">TWTR -1.94%</a> and <a href="#">Cisco Systems</a> Inc., <a href="#">CSCO 2.95%</a> according to the companies.</p> <p>Amazon, the world’s biggest cloud computing company, said in a security alert, “We are actively monitoring this issue, and are working on addressing it.”</p> <p>The Department of Homeland Security’s Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency on Friday issued an alert about the vulnerability and urged companies to take action. CISA Director Jen Easterly on</p>

Saturday added, “To be clear, this vulnerability poses a severe risk. We will only minimize potential impacts through collaborative efforts between government and the private sector.”

Software providers that include Log4j in their products, such as [International Business Machines Corp.](#)’s [IBM 0.42%](#) Red Hat, [Oracle Corp.](#) [ORCL 15.61%](#) and [VMware Inc.](#), [VMW 0.28%](#) have said they are deploying patches.

Because the bug is easy to exploit and attacks hard to block, the Log4j problem could be used by hackers to break into corporate networks for years to come, said Aaron Portnoy, principal scientist with the security firm Randori. “It is one of the most significant vulnerabilities that I’ve seen in a long time,” he said.

The flaw gives hackers a way of turning the log files that keep track of what users do on computer servers into malicious instructions that force the machine to download unauthorized software, giving them a beachhead on a victim’s network.

The issue was reported late last month to the Log4j development team, a group of volunteer coders who distribute their software free-of-charge as part of the Apache Software Foundation, according to Ralph Goers, a volunteer with the project. The foundation is a nonprofit group that helps oversee the development of many open-source programs.

“It’s a very critical issue,” Mr. Goers said. “People need to upgrade to get the fix.” Log4j is used on servers to keep records of users’ activities so they can be reviewed later on by security or software development teams.

Because Log4j is distributed free, it is unclear how many servers are affected by the bug but the logging software has been downloaded millions of times, Mr. Goers said.

It isn’t the first time the open-source software has sparked security worries. In 2014, internet users worldwide were urged to reset their passwords after another issue—known as Heartbleed—was discovered in OpenSSL, an obscure yet similarly ubiquitous piece of internet software built by volunteers.

Hackers started exploiting the recent flaw early Friday to gain access to servers running Microsoft’s MSFT 2.83% Minecraft gaming software, researchers said. But they soon observed widespread scanning and attempts to trigger the Log4j bug across the internet. In a note published Friday, Microsoft advised Minecraft users to upgrade their software to patch the bug.

During a roughly 24-hour period, the security firm Check Point Software Technologies Ltd. said it saw more than 100,000 attempts to exploit the bug—about half of which it estimated were from malicious cyberattackers. The rest were by legitimate researchers, either governments scanning national infrastructure or security researchers, CheckPoint said.

A Dutch researcher, Cas van Cooten, said he discovered the bug on Apple Inc.’s AAPL 2.80% servers, potentially giving him a way of running code within Apple’s network. Mr. van Cooten said he immediately reported the issue to Apple.

“It would have been trivial for a malicious hacker to weaponize this,” he said. An Apple spokesman didn’t respond to messages seeking comment.

Another researcher, Carson Owlett, said that consultants working with his security firm, Black Mirage LLC, were able to detect the bug on systems run by other companies, including Twitter and LinkedIn, also owned by Microsoft.

“Our teams are looking into it, but we have no details to share at this time,” a Twitter spokeswoman said via email Friday. A LinkedIn spokeswoman said via text message that “while we’re responding to this, just as security teams at many companies are, we’re not experiencing any active issue.”



Because all sorts of data is logged by servers—everything from email addresses to web navigation requests—these attempts could give attackers a foothold on a vulnerable server deep in corporate networks, said Ryan McGeehan, an independent security consultant who was formerly a director of security at Facebook. “A successful attack is like creating a wormhole,” he said. “The attacker can’t be sure where they’ll end up.”

But security experts cautioned that even though researchers may have detected the Log4j flaw on technology companies’ websites, many of them have other processes in place that would prevent a malicious hacker from running software and breaking into these companies.

Cisco is investigating more than 150 of its products to look for the Log4j bug. So far, it has found three vulnerable products and determined that 23 aren’t vulnerable, a company spokesman said Saturday.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 ‘Most critical vulnerability of decade’</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/dec/10/software-flaw-most-critical-vulnerability-log-4-shell">https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/dec/10/software-flaw-most-critical-vulnerability-log-4-shell</a>
GIST	<p>A critical vulnerability in a widely used software tool – one quickly exploited in the online game Minecraft – is rapidly emerging as a major threat to organizations around the world.</p> <p>The exploit s known as a ‘zero-day’ vulnerability, which allows users of the spyware to infect a phone without the user having any idea that their mobile phones have been hacked.</p> <p>“The internet’s on fire right now,” said Adam Meyers, senior vice-president of intelligence at the cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike. “People are scrambling to patch”, he said, “and all kinds of people scrambling to exploit it.” He said on Friday morning that in the 12 hours since the bug’s existence was disclosed, it had been “fully weaponized”, meaning malefactors had developed and distributed tools to exploit it.</p> <p>The flaw, dubbed “Log4Shell”, may be the worst computer vulnerability discovered in years. It was uncovered in an open-source logging tool that is ubiquitous in cloud servers and enterprise software used across the industry and the government. Unless it is fixed, it grants criminals, spies and programming novices alike, easy access to internal networks where they can loot valuable data, plant malware, erase crucial information and much more.</p> <p>“I’d be hard-pressed to think of a company that’s not at risk,” said Joe Sullivan, chief security officer for Cloudflare, whose online infrastructure protects websites from malicious actors. Untold millions of servers have it installed and experts said the fallout would not be known for several days.</p> <p>Amit Yoran, CEO of the cybersecurity firm Tenable, called it “the single biggest, most critical vulnerability of the last decade” – and possibly the biggest in the history of modern computing.</p> <p>The vulnerability was rated 10 on a scale of one to 10 by the Apache Software Foundation, which oversees development of the software. Anyone with the exploit can obtain full access to an unpatched computer that uses the software.</p> <p>Experts said the extreme ease with which the vulnerability lets an attacker access a web server – no password required – is what makes it so dangerous.</p> <p>New Zealand’s computer emergency response team was among the first to report that the flaw was being “actively exploited in the wild” just hours after it was publicly reported on Thursday and a patch released.</p> <p>The vulnerability, located in open-source Apache software used to run websites and other web services, was reported to the foundation on 24 November by the Chinese tech giant Alibaba, it said. It took two weeks to develop and release a fix.</p>



	<p>But patching systems around the world could be a complicated task. While most organizations and cloud providers such as Amazon Web Services should be able to update their web servers easily, the same Apache software is also often embedded in third-party programs, which can only be updated by their owners.</p> <p>Yoran said organizations needed to presume they'd been compromised and act quickly.</p> <p>The first obvious signs of the flaw's exploitation appeared in Minecraft, an online game hugely popular with kids and owned by Microsoft. Meyers and the security expert Marcus Hutchins said Minecraft users were already using it to execute programs on the computers of other users by pasting a short message in a chat box.</p> <p>Microsoft said it had issued a software update for Minecraft users. "Customers who apply the fix are protected," it said.</p> <p>Researchers reported finding evidence the vulnerability could be exploited in servers run by companies such as Apple, Amazon, Twitter and Cloudflare.</p> <p>Cloudflare's Sullivan said there was no indication his company's servers had been compromised. Apple, Amazon and Twitter did not immediately respond to requests for comment.</p>
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## Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	<b>12/13 Jemaah Islamiyah emerges from shadows</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/jemaah-islamiyah-terrorist-group-indonesia-isd-20th-anniversary-al-qaeda-2373556">https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/jemaah-islamiyah-terrorist-group-indonesia-isd-20th-anniversary-al-qaeda-2373556</a>
GIST	<p>SINGAPORE: The Hezbollah, a militant group in Lebanon known for its bloody history of sectarian violence and branded as a terrorist organisation by many countries, shocked the world when it became part of the winning coalition during the Middle Eastern country's parliamentary elections in 2018.</p> <p>Presently, the hybrid political-militant group holds considerable sway among Lebanese state institutions, where it enjoys legitimacy without accountability for its actions, concluded a report from London-based think tank Chatham House in June.</p> <p>About 9,000km away in Indonesia, experts fear that another shadowy organisation with a violent past is watching these events and taking some cues.</p> <p>Despite crackdowns by security agencies, arrests of several key leaders, and a global war on terror that also saw the emergence of rival groups antithetical to its cause, the scourge of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) organisation that terrorised Southeast Asia in the early 2000s still persists today.</p> <p>Many Singaporeans would be familiar with JI — last week marked <a href="#">the 20th anniversary of the Dec 8, 2001 crackdown</a> against the terrorist group in Singapore, which involved the arrests of dozens of its members and exposed the true extent of the nefarious group's activities in the region. It subsequently emerged that JI drew up plans to attack nearly 80 targets in Singapore.</p> <p>Terrorism experts point to how security actions have decimated JI in the region, restricting its clandestine activities to its base in Indonesia, where it had originated.</p> <p>But there are increasing signs that JI, whose members are estimated to number between 6,000 and 10,000 today, is learning from militant groups such as Hezbollah and the Hamas in Palestine by morphing into a similarly "hybrid" variant of Islamist extremism that will be hard to eradicate.</p>

In recent weeks, intelligence and security-related news emanating from Indonesia have set alarm bells ringing for global security experts. The information reveals how JI could be entrenching itself in legitimate businesses and charities, and even [dabbling in local politics](#).

On Nov 16, Indonesian counter-terrorism police force Detachment 88 arrested three individuals suspected to be JI members, including Farid Ahmad Okbah, who founded the Indonesia's People Dakwah Party (PDRI) earlier this year.

Farid is believed to be a member of JI's governing council and his party is a new conduit used by JI, said the Indonesian police which is investigating the links. The PDRI has challenged these assertions.

Also arrested for JI links was Ahmad Zain An-Najah, who was a member of the fatwa commission of the Indonesia Ulema Council, which is the country's top Islamic clerical body and a government-funded organisation.

If the allegations against PDRI are confirmed, this marks the first time that JI has tried to formally participate in the political process in Indonesia by forming a political party, even though its ideology rejects democracy.

Asked about these developments, Singapore's Internal Security Department (ISD) said that despite the efforts of anti-terror agencies over the years, JI remains resilient and adaptable, even as it beats a tactical retreat.

ISD said JI now appears to be shifting its strategy away from violent attacks and towards the "political infiltration" of political parties, charities and other open-front organisations.

Such efforts are likely to be geared towards "garnering resources and cultivating ground support" for its eventual goal of establishing an Islamic state.

"In ISD's assessment, JI is playing the 'long game' and has not forsaken its militant ideology and ambitions of establishing a Daulah Islamiyah (Islamic state) in Southeast Asia through armed jihad. "It has also not renounced the use of violence," said its spokesperson.

The alleged attempts to seek political legitimacy is nevertheless a concerning sign that the "ground" that JI seeks is shifting in its favour, said Mr Mohd Adhe Bhakti, executive director of Centre for Radicalism and Deradicalisation Studies based in Indonesia.

Mr Adhe, pointing to trends towards religiosity in his own country, said: "At this time, there is a feeling of a wave of Islamisation in Indonesia ... (whereby) Muslims want to feel closer to religion.

"I think these values of wanting to be more religious have become a catalyst and have been greatly used by groups, including the JI."

Amid the rise of religious conservatism in Indonesia, the New York Times noted in 2019 a rise in faith politics as Indonesia engages in a "national spiritual reckoning", adding that puritanical Salafist interpretations of Islam from the Arabic world are attracting followers there.

Associate Professor Kumar Ramakrishna, who heads the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) said these developments in Indonesia, which has the largest Muslim population in the world, are important to watch.

But it remains to be seen if Islamist political parties can gain a firmer hold at the ballot box, since they have traditionally not fared well in national polls, he said.

In any case, with investigations still ongoing, the opening of a political front for JI poses interesting questions about the future of the banned organisation, said the terrorism expert.

For one, it would be no surprise if JI is picking up pointers from groups such as Lebanon's Hezbollah or Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, whose candidate Mohammed Morsi won the presidential election in 2012 though he was ousted by the military a year later.

"We are approaching an inflection point as far as the JI is concerned," said Assoc Prof Ramakrishna.

### **REGIONAL CRACKDOWN**

JI was borne as a splinter cell from a post-colonial separatist movement, the Darul Islam, that sought to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia through violent insurgency, thus rejecting the country's secular "Pancasila" philosophy set out by its first president, Sukarno, that had brought the diverse indigenous groups of the archipelago together.

When Darul Islam's leader was captured in 1962, it effectively fragmented the group, and two of its members, Abu Bakar Bashir and Abdullah Sungkar, would later found JI in 1993. Both of them had links with the Al-Qaeda terrorist organisation in Afghanistan, having travelled there in the 1980s.

Abu Bakar, 83, who remains JI's spiritual leader, was [released from prison in January this year](#) after serving 11 years out of a 15-year sentence for funding a militant training camp. His 55 month remission was due to good behaviour and his ailing health.

"By the time JI was formed in 1993, it already had a global jihad emphasis as compared to Darul Islam's Indonesia-first focus," said Assoc Prof Ramakrishna.

But with Singapore sounding the alarm on JI in 2001, and following the Bali bombings in October 2002 (Indonesia's worst terrorist attack which killed more than 200 people), the resulting crackdown against the militant group in Indonesia and other countries disrupted its hierarchical structure, he added.

The group essentially went into a period of relative decline after that and went back to its roots of focusing on Indonesia first, said the terrorism expert.

Over the years since 2002, experts said around 900 JI members have been nabbed. Mr Adhe believes at least seven "emirs" — JI's top leaders — have been caught as well.

JI, however, remained dangerous and violent in this period of crackdown. Arrests of top leaders could lead to reprisal attacks by other members, and there had been cases of several JI attacks when the organisation lost its leaders to the crackdown, Mr Adhe added.

"So as an organisation, they are very obedient and disciplined, but when they lose a figure of leadership ... they become vulnerable and wild," he said.

### **THE SEEDS OF NEO-JI**

In late 2009, JI leader Para Wijayanto came to prominence within the organisation, and was named as its emir after the arrest of his predecessor Abu Husna in Malaysia.

For a decade until 2019, Para Wijayanto sought to resurrect JI from its diminished state by refocusing its objective within Indonesia first, pausing the violence that the militant group had become known for, given that this had kept JI high on the security radar of anti-terror forces.

The evolving strategy of JI at the time led some observers to label the group as the "Neo-JI".

"JI under Para Wijayanto focused on religious outreach and less on jihad, because the lesson from the JI perspective was that global jihad and violent activities led to a reaction that decimated them," said Assoc Prof Ramakrishna. "They wanted a long period of gestation."

Para Wijayanto planted the seeds for rebuilding and regrouping the organisation, into one that would bide its time by developing a strong political base in the community before engaging in jihad again.

“That is the sort of ‘strategic patience’ that Para Wijayanto created — some would call it a ‘jihad-later’ approach,” said Assoc Prof Ramakrishna.

Singapore's ISD said the regional JI network had remained “quietly active” in Indonesia, expanding its support base through outreach and recruitment activities as well as rebuilding its military capabilities.

“Security forces’ preoccupation with the IS threat in recent years has also given the JI space to regroup,” said the ISD, referring to the terror group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

Islamic State’s ideology to create a global caliphate centred in Iraq and Syria, through military conquest of territory, was in conflict with the aims of JI and its affiliates Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, which among other things, desired to establish an Islamic state based on Syariah law in their respective countries.

In Indonesia, Islamic State-aligned groups, such as Jamaah Ansharut Daulah and East Indonesian Mujahideen, distracted the authorities from the JI threat from mid-2014. Both had carried out bloody attacks such as bombings, including of a Sulawesi church this year, while JI ceased all violent actions.

Associate Professor Andrew Tan, from the Department of Security Studies and Criminology at Macquarie University in Australia, said the sudden and messy United States withdrawal from Afghanistan in August — which paved the way for the return of the Taliban, another Islamist fundamentalist group — was, in fact, a shot in the arm for JI and its supporters.

“The re-emergence of the Taliban has been a huge morale booster to militants around the world. It appears to prove to them that if you are persistent, even in the face of great odds, you can ultimately achieve victory.

“It is too early to say how this event would change the JI's stance and tactics but it would certainly hearten them,” he said.

### **BECOMING MAINSTREAM**

While JI shifted its rebuilding efforts towards proselytising its cause via above-ground entities such as businesses and charitable foundations, one notable shift during Para Wijayanto’s reign was also to participate in Indonesian politics.

This was a departure from JI’s past stance towards participation in democracy. To the group, democratic elections are a man-made system and anathema to Islam.

In a paper published in June on JI's hierarchy, RSIS associate research fellow V Arianti described Para Wijayanto’s new approach as a strategy that “emphasises the methodical acquisition and consolidation of influence over territory and to build support”.

Besides an armed struggle, the strategy would emphasise political consolidation by winning over the hearts and minds of Indonesian Muslims, through the group’s existing sermons and religious study sessions, JI-aligned Islamic boarding schools, as well as by courting community leaders over to the JI cause.

In 2016, JI would also involve itself in political mass protests, including the “212 movement” rallies against then Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, also known as Ahok, the researcher noted. Basuki had been accused of blasphemy against Islam in a speech in 2016 and lost the gubernatorial election the next year, and was also sentenced to two years’ jail.

Reports at the time said that JI members had joined the rallies and Para Wijayanto had encouraged its members to vote in elections.

Since the incident, Mr Adhe said there has been a growing wave of conservative Islam among people in Indonesia, with some perceiving the current government of Joko Widodo as anti-Islam.

“This Islamisation wave cannot be separated from the impact of the Jakarta gubernatorial election in 2017 ... The negative sentiment which then led to the massive demonstration did not stop when the election ended,” said Mr Adhe.

Assoc Prof Ramakrishna agreed, adding that the Ahok incident likely signalled to JI that people’s views may be shifting in its favour, and may be more open to the group’s more extreme ideas.

In that context, the establishment of a political party that is actually JI in disguise is the natural next step for the terrorist group.

“This is something worth watching. If you asked me 20 years ago, I would never have expected JI to enter into politics,” he said.

He pointed out that whenever Islamic extremist groups go into politics and succeeds in gaining mainstream political legitimacy, one of two things could happen: It could end up pushing the whole political system towards the extreme but on the other hand, it could also force the group to recognise political realities on the ground and moderate its stance further.

In the case of Hezbollah in Lebanon, its victory in the polls did not mean a formal takeover of the state functions by the group, as it was faced with the realities of delivering citizens’ needs when it had little ability to do so.

Since the Beirut port explosion last year, many Lebanese citizens have pointed the finger at Hezbollah for causing the country’s long-running problems, attributing the mismanagement and corruption of the Lebanese state to the group.

Assoc Prof Ramakrishna said: “When (extremist groups) engage in politics, they realise that life is very complicated. There’s no black and white, it’s actually very grey, and they now need to actually work with the people.”

However, some experts believe that JI’s political debut may be a result of a lack of options caused by the massive clampdown against the group, rather than a deliberate change in tack by JI leaders.

Assoc Prof Tan from Macquarie said of the founding of PDRI by a suspected JI insider: “It is probably a necessary tactical move given the loss of operational capabilities as a result of counter-terrorism operations, and consistent surveillance by Indonesian counter-terrorism police.”

Mr Raffaello Pantucci, a terrorism analyst at Britain’s Royal United Services Institute and a senior fellow at RSIS, noted that whether JI’s recent moves are a result of strategic patience or effective deterrence by the authorities is still a matter of academic debate.

It also remains to be seen whether the PDRI is indeed a JI front, or is only characterised as such because it takes an Islamist stance that differs from the current government, he said.

“Ideologically, if you are a secularist, you could look at those advancing an Islamist narrative and say, well, these guys are all kind of the same group. So, I would question a little bit about whether that’s really what’s happening here,” he added.

## **A PROBLEM FOR SINGAPORE**

In any case, the resurgence of the regional JI network is a matter of grave concern for Singapore, given the group's history of targeting the country and its links with the United States.

The ISD spokesperson said JI's comeback "will directly raise the threat of an attack against Singapore and our interests".

"Notably, Singapore continues to be seen as a prized target by the JI. Singapore and our interests have resurfaced in JI-linked attack plans over the past decade or so," said the ISD.

For example, in 2010, the Indonesian authorities discovered a map of Singapore's MRT network – with Orchard MRT station circled – and a street map of Orchard Road, in the possession of a JI-linked terror suspect who was involved in a JI-led militant training camp in Aceh, Indonesia.

Separately, in 2011, the Indonesian authorities also uncovered a plot by a JI-affiliated militant to attack Singaporeans leaving the Singapore embassy in Jakarta.

Although JI's softer tactics in recent years may have taken some heat off the authorities, the reality is that counter-terror forces in the region have not taken their eyes off the JI completely, even if other Islamist extremist groups with more violent tendencies take priority.

The ISD's spokesperson added: "Given the serious long-term security threat that JI poses to Singapore, ISD continues to monitor the regional JI network closely, and cooperates with our foreign counterparts through regular intelligence exchanges to counter the JI threat."

Para Wijayanto was arrested in 2019 by the Indonesian police, which have continued to nab JI members who are involved in other non-military fronts, such as financing and religious outreach.

Despite JI's tactics to present a gentler face, experts said the militant group has not truly deviated from its doctrine of carrying out violence against secular governments and citizens, as well as against Western interests in the region.

Mr Adhe noted that although Para Wijayanto's Neo-JI appeared to have abolished its military wing, the "askari", from its formal structure, the group still maintains its ability to carry out violence by sending personnel to conflict zones to continue their training.

From 2013 to early 2018, dozens of JI members who served in this wing had been successfully dispatched to train in Syria with its affiliate Al-Nusra Front, an ally of Al-Qaeda, he said.

"The violence that they still maintain is always justified as an obligation by the religion. In policy, they seem to disengage from violence, but culturally they still make preparations ... in case Muslims are attacked by enemies," said Mr Adhe.

Mr Pantucci said that as long as the authorities continue to maintain the pressure on JI, as is the case today, the group will continue to lose its relevance.

"What is concerning is that the JI is an organisation that has not gone away, but at the same time it does seem to be substantially degraded because of effective deterrence," he said.

"The group has not launched an attack in a very long time now, and instead what we see today are a series of arrests of important people in the JI in escalating numbers, and I'd argue that the JI is a shadow of itself."

Assoc Prof Tan agreed that the Indonesian authorities are not taking any chances, arresting Abu Rusdan, who is JI's public face, in September.

He said: “Indonesia is demonstrating that it is important to sustain counter-terrorism operations and surveillance to proactively deal with the continued militant threat — something we can all learn from.”

As to how the ISD can guard Singapore against JI’s political moves to legitimise itself or its attempts to win over hearts and minds in the region, the department said the country has a “strong zero-tolerance approach towards any form of extremist or divisive ideologies”, especially if they advocate the use of violence.

“We have drawn a clear separation between religion and politics, with safeguards instituted to preserve our racial and religious harmony,” said the ISD spokesperson.

“These principles remain relevant and pertinent even as the threat landscape evolves. The (Singapore) Government will not hesitate to use the Internal Security Act or other relevant laws against any groups or individuals who pose a threat to the security and stability of Singapore.”

### **KEEPING WATCH**

At present, there is no indication that JI’s activities in Indonesia have spilled into Singapore. Indonesian JI members are not rekindling old ties with their former Singapore associates, nor are there any credible and specific intelligence of any JI-linked plots that target the city state and its interests, the ISD said last week in its report commemorating the 20th anniversary of the JI arrests.

In the meantime, the community also plays an important role in keeping Singapore safe and secure, the department said, urging vigilance.

“Besides making a conscious effort to preserve social cohesion, Singaporeans must also remain vigilant. Concrete steps such as flagging out suspicious persons and activities, and extremist online content to the authorities can help to prevent extremism from taking root in Singapore,” it said.

The ISD called on Singaporeans to look out for these signs of radicalisation among people:

- The display of insignia or symbols in support of extremist and terrorist groups
- Frequently surfing radical websites
- Posting and sharing extremist views on social media platforms like expressing support and admiration for terrorists or terrorist groups, as well as the use of violence
- Sharing their extremist views with friends and relatives
- Making remarks that promote ill-will or hatred towards people of other races or religions
- Expressing intent to participate in acts of violence overseas or in Singapore
- Inciting others to participate in acts of violence

Assoc Prof Ramakrishna said that youths are particularly vulnerable to radicalisation. In an age where they are looking for certainty of right versus wrong or good versus evil, they turn to the Internet for answers, he said.

It is thus pivotal that Singaporeans are more aware of these warning signs, and to alert the authorities if they see signs of radicalisation.

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HEADLINE	12/12 Afghan evacuations slow; ‘at risk’ long wait
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-afghans-evacuations-taliban/2021/12/12/9e736eb8-4d7c-11ec-b0b0-766bbbe79347_story.html">https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-afghans-evacuations-taliban/2021/12/12/9e736eb8-4d7c-11ec-b0b0-766bbbe79347_story.html</a>
GIST	When desperate Afghans fought their way into Kabul’s international airport during the last two weeks of August, most of those lucky enough to get past Taliban checkpoints, the crush of their panicked compatriots, and U.S. military and diplomatic gatekeepers found a spot on a departing airplane.



U.S. passports and visas paved the way for some. But many simply managed to get there, some with a slip of paper showing the right connections, and others with only the look of despair and determination on their faces.

Since the final military plane departed on Aug. 31, Biden administration officials from the president on down have repeatedly pledged to continue helping all “at risk” Afghans left behind.

But the fairly indiscriminate fire hose of departures in August has now become a painfully slow drip of prioritized passengers. U.S.-organized charter flights that began in late September have evacuated only about 3,000 Afghans, compared with tens of thousands in August.

The administration says the process is now limited by the realities on the ground in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, along with the constraints of U.S. immigration law and its own capacity to deal with the situation. It is prioritizing U.S. citizens and residents and those with special immigrant visas (SIVs) in their Afghan passports, indicating they had worked as [interpreters or in other capacities](#) for the U.S. government, or have progressed beyond a certain point in the SIV application process.

“The evacuation in August was of a mass quantity over a very short period of time,” a senior State Department official said. “There’s no way we’re going to be able to duplicate that scope and scale . . . when we don’t have people in the country, there’s not really a functioning airport, and arguably there are tens if not hundreds of thousands who would fall into the broad category of ‘at risk.’ ”

“We’re doing as much as we can, when we can,” said the senior official, one of a half dozen involved in the effort across the administration who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive issue.

Critics blame the slowdown on what they say is a lack of official compassion, competence and fidelity to the administration’s own promises.

U.S. veterans have appealed on behalf of members of the Afghan security forces whom they trained and fought alongside. Universities and students have written to Secretary of State Antony Blinken urging “immediate action to help save Afghanistan’s scholars, students, and civil society actors,” including [women’s rights activists](#), from life, and possible death, under the Taliban.

“The White House, together with the State Department, have purposefully crafted the narrowest possible criteria for being evacuated to the U.S.,” said Alexa Greenwald, who heads evacuation efforts for Sayara International, one of a number of nongovernmental organizations working to get Afghans out of the country. “They want to resettle as few Afghans as possible.”

For some, the seeds of the [current situation](#) were sown early this year, when Biden ordered a full U.S. departure, set a quick deadline, and failed to start mass evacuations long before Taliban fighters reached Kabul on Aug. 15.

“It was just one bad decision after another,” said Rep. Michael McCaul (R-Tex.), the top minority member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. “And along the way, they repeatedly misled the public and made promises they failed to keep. It’s created a lot of distrust, both with these outside groups as well as members of Congress on both sides of the aisle.”

McCaul’s office, and those of many other lawmakers, continue to field appeals from desperate Afghans stuck inside the country.

### **An indefinite wait**

What the U.S. government calls the August noncombatant evacuation operation, or NEO, brought more than 74,000 Afghans to this country. Most of them were neither citizens, U.S. residents nor SIV holders.

They were authorized for admission to the United States under a provision of U.S. immigration law called humanitarian parole, ordered by Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas on Aug. 23, while the

NEO was underway. It allows admissions for “urgent humanitarian reasons” or “significant public benefit” to the United States.

Invoked at the discretion of the administration, humanitarian parole is rarely used for mass admissions. It allowed 130,000 Vietnamese into the country in 1975, and 6,600 Iraqis in 1996 after the Persian Gulf War. As with those crises, the mass Afghanistan parole was temporary and applied only to those who left during the NEO. Advocates representing thousands of Afghans still inside the country have called for the administration to reopen it to allow them in.

But officials say parole is not a long-term solution. In addition to being politically unpalatable and beyond the capabilities of an intake system struggling with those already here, immigration law specifies that humanitarian parole is not to be used in place of the normal refugee process.

After medical screening, immunizations and security vetting, about 70,000 who received [parole status](#) [were flown](#) to the United States and distributed to military bases across the country for resettlement by nongovernmental agencies.

More than half of them have now been settled around the country, a process slowed by the inability of refugee agencies — with staff and capabilities shrunk after the Trump administration severely limited refugee admissions — to cope with the large numbers. The parole is good for two years, during which the Afghans can apply for permanent U.S. status.

Thousands of others evacuated during the NEO were on flights that landed in countries that responded to U.S. requests to temporarily take them, including Poland, North Macedonia, Albania, Uganda, the United Arab Emirates and others.

Many of them are now stuck in those places, in part because there are not enough physicians with the necessary U.S. government certification, or U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services vetters, available to deal with them.

The U.S. plan, after the NEO, was to charter flights out of Afghanistan in a far more organized manner. But the numbers so far have been small, and seats have been given out in strict order of priority.

The chartered aircraft belong to Qatar Airways, the only carrier that has been permitted by the Taliban to land with any regularity in Kabul. Some weeks, there have been two flights, and other times only one.

“It seems they’ve drawn a line in the sand in who they want to take,” said one person involved in the private effort, speaking on the condition of anonymity for fear of antagonizing U.S. authorities. “I get that there are lots of external limitations around the flights and bureaucracy, but there are also limitations that have been imposed internally.”

Who gets a seat is determined by the State Department, with first priority going to U.S. citizens, nearly all of them Afghan Americans, followed by permanent residents. As of Dec. 6, the United States had brought in 470 citizens and 417 residents along with their families, limited by U.S. law to spouses and minor children.

The administration has said that all of the American citizens it knows of in Afghanistan have now left or been given an opportunity to leave. Those who have chosen to stay, officials said, are primarily Afghans with ineligible extended family members they do not want to leave behind.

Most of those aboard the flights fall into the third priority category, those who hold physically or electronically issued SIVs or who have progressed beyond a certain point in the application process.

Others on the U.S. charters, or in spare seats on occasional Qatari government-organized flights that have their own lists of priority evacuees, include eligible family members left behind on previous flights,

Afghan employees of the U.S. Embassy or other U.S. government agencies, or those for whom special pleading in the United States has succeeded.

Qatar has insisted that everyone on board one of its charter flights have a passport, both U.S. and Qatari officials said. Officials said that the Taliban has been surprisingly cooperative, for the most part, in issuing Afghan passports and has not, to date, refused to allow any manifested passenger to leave.

In the meantime, there are no commercial flights in or out of the country, and the already small number of charters is likely to shrink as winter sets in. The Kabul airport has no radar or air traffic control system, and flights can only land during the daytime. Set in a bowl amid mountain ranges, its visibility will decrease with the cold weather. The city is already becoming filled with winter smog and smoke as Afghans burn whatever they can find to stay warm.

When the snow and ice come, there is little besides shovels to clear the runways. There are no functioning aircraft de-icers in Afghanistan, according to U.S. and Qatari officials.

At the current rate, it will take months, or perhaps years, to evacuate everyone in the three priority categories, let alone those who fall outside them.

“We are grateful that there are examples of people getting out,” said Krish O’Mara Vignarajah, president of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, a private group that is helping resettle Afghans who make it to the United States.

But “it’s troubling when you think of the denominator, which is not just tens of thousands but hundreds of thousands of at-risk Afghans,” she said.

Some have been able to leave the country on their own, or with help from rescue and humanitarian organizations still operating inside the country. An estimated 4,000 to 5,000 a day cross the largely desert terrain along Afghanistan’s western border to enter Iran, joining the several million Afghans already there, according to the Iranian government and to Jan Egeland, head of the Norwegian Refugee Council, who visited both the western Afghan border area and Tehran in recent weeks.

Land borders to the north with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and China are closed and heavily patrolled by those countries. Pakistan, to the east and south, has sporadically allowed Afghans to enter by land, but only those with preexisting visas or guarantees by countries such as the United States that they will leave immediately.

Some organizations have arranged charter flights from airports other than Kabul’s, primarily from the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif. But they have had great difficulty persuading other countries to let them land, and U.S. officials have declined to intervene to advocate for flights whose passengers they are unable to vet or vouch for with no presence on the ground in Afghanistan.

Some countries in Latin America and elsewhere have allowed entry in the belief — shared by many Afghans — that they are serving as a brief way station for more or less automatic entry into the United States, according to U.S. officials. Many may be disappointed.

At recent congressional hearings, senior officials have been criticized for failing to bring enough people to safety, while simultaneously risking the admission of terrorists.

“Hundreds, maybe thousands of Americans have been left behind to the enemy, where they still remain,” Sen. Josh Hawley (R-Mo.) told Mayorkas when he testified last month, even as Hawley charged that the quick admission of so many Afghans as part of the NEO posed an “unbelievable” security risk.

Others say such disputes about numbers and eligibility, along with excuses about resettlement capacity, the law and an overburdened bureaucracy, should not distract from the larger question of what Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) called the “moral imperative” to do more for the Afghans.

"I really believe that some proactive and creative thinking, combined with a sense of urgency, could achieve better results," Blumenthal, who has advocated on behalf of groups trying to secure U.S. support for private evacuation flights, said in an interview. "A great nation keeps its promises," he said.

There are two avenues open to those "at risk" and still in Afghanistan, asylum or refugee admission, both of which require first getting out of Afghanistan, and both of which can take years. Although the administration has implemented measures to expedite both the refugee and asylum processes for Afghans, other laws and proposals over the past few months to ease their path to U.S. admission, including making all eligible for SIV status, have not succeeded.

In floor speeches Thursday, Blumenthal and Republican Sens. Lindsey Graham (S.C.) and Joni Ernst (Iowa), called for the administration to step up its efforts and break through red tape, and for Congress to stop dismissing legislation that would help.

But senior administration officials said that direct evacuation from Afghanistan will not pick up until airports are open, more flights are available, and the United States has more officials to process those who get out to a third country. Even then, one said, it could take years for the United States just to process the tens of thousands believed to be eligible for SIV status.

For everyone else — those who worked for a U.S. government agency or U.S.-funded organization, the U.S.-trained Afghan military commandos, the women, civil society leaders and journalists and many thousands of others who are believed to be at risk — there is likely to be a significant, if not an indefinite, wait. Some who make it out on their own, or with the help of advocates on the outside, may never be admitted.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/13 Taliban seek ties w/US, other ex-foes</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/ap-interview-taliban-seek-ties-us-foes-81717145">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/ap-interview-taliban-seek-ties-us-foes-81717145</a>
GIST	<p>KABUL, Afghanistan -- Afghanistan's new Taliban rulers are committed in principle to education and jobs for girls and women, a marked departure from their previous time in power, and seek the world's "mercy and compassion" to help millions of Afghans in desperate need, a top Taliban leader said in a rare interview.</p> <p>Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi also told The Associated Press that the Taliban government wants good relations with all countries and has no issue with the United States. He urged Washington and other nations to release upward of \$10 billion in funds that were frozen when the Taliban took power Aug. 15, following a rapid military sweep across Afghanistan and the sudden, secret flight of U.S.-backed President Ashraf Ghani.</p> <p>"Sanctions against Afghanistan would ... not have any benefit," Muttaqi said Sunday, speaking in his native Pashto during the interview in the sprawling pale brick Foreign Ministry building in the heart of the Afghan capital of Kabul.</p> <p>"Making Afghanistan unstable or having a weak Afghan government is not in the interest of anyone," said Muttaqi, whose aides include employees of the previous government as well as those recruited from the ranks of the Taliban.</p> <p>Muttaqi acknowledged the world's outrage at the Taliban-imposed limitations on girls' education and on women in the work force. In many parts of Afghanistan, female high school students between the grades of seven and 12 have not been permitted to go to school since the Taliban took over, and many female civil servants have been told to stay home. Taliban officials have said they need time to create gender-segregated arrangements in schools and work places that meet their severe interpretation of Islam.</p>

When they first ruled from 1996-2001, the Taliban shocked the world by barring girls and women from schools and jobs, banning most entertainment and sports and occasionally carrying out executions in front of large crowds in sports stadiums.

But Muttaqi said the Taliban have changed since they last ruled.

“We have made progress in administration and in politics ... in interaction with the nation and the world. With each passing day we will gain more experience and make more progress,” he said.

Muttaqi said that under the new Taliban government, girls are going to school through to Grade 12 in 10 of the country's 34 provinces, private schools and universities are operating unhindered and 100% of women who had previously worked in the health sector are back on the job. “This shows that we are committed in principle to women participation,” he said.

He claimed that the Taliban have not targeted their opponents, instead having announced a general amnesty and providing some protection. Leaders of the previous government live without threat in Kabul, he said, though the majority have fled.

Last month, the international group Human Rights Watch published a report saying the Taliban summarily killed or forcibly disappeared more than 100 former police and intelligence officials in four provinces. However, there have been no reports of large-scale retribution.

Muttaqi charged the Afghan government that took power after the U.S.-led coalition ousted the Taliban regime in 2001 carried out widespread revenge attacks against the Taliban. Hundreds disappeared or were killed, causing thousands to flee to the mountains, he said. The Taliban were ousted for harboring al Qaida and Osama bin Laden who masterminded the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the U.S.

Muttaqi insisted poverty and the dream of a better life — not fear — drove thousands of Afghans to rush the Kabul airport in mid-August in hopes of getting to America. The crush of people had generated searing images of men clinging to a departing American C-17 aircraft, while others fell to the ground as the wheels retracted.

He said the Taliban have made mistakes in their first months in power and that “we will work for more reforms which can benefit the nation.” He did not elaborate on the mistakes or possible reforms.

Muttaqi pushed back against comments by U.S. Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie who told the AP last week that the al-Qaida extremist group has grown slightly inside Afghanistan since U.S. forces left in late August. McKenzie is Washington’s top military commander in the Middle East.

In a February 2020 deal that spelled out the terms of a U.S. troop withdrawal, the Taliban had promised to fight terrorism and deny terrorist groups a safe haven.

Muttaqi said Sunday that the Taliban have kept that promise, along with a pledge not to attack U.S. and NATO forces during the final phase of the withdrawal which ended in late August.

“Unfortunately, there are (always) allegation against the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan , but there is no proof,” said Muttaqi. “If McKenzie has any proof, he should provide it. With confidence I can say that this is a baseless allegation.”

Meanwhile, Islamic State militants have stepped up attacks on Taliban patrols and religious minorities in the past four months. The IS affiliate in Afghanistan has targeted Shiite mosques in the provincial capitals of Kunduz and Kandahar, and carried out frequent attacks on Taliban vehicles.

Muttaqi however said the Taliban have gained the upper hand in recent weeks, saying there had not been a major attack in the last month. Washington’s ability to track IS activities in Afghanistan has been handicapped since the troop withdrawal.

	<p>Muttaqi said he does not envision cooperating with the U.S. in the battle against the Islamic State group.</p> <p>However, he did express hope that with time, “America will slowly, slowly change its policy toward Afghanistan” as it sees evidence that a Taliban-ruled country able to stand on its own is a benefit to America.</p> <p>“My last point is to America, to the American nation: You are a great and big nation and you must have enough patience and have a big heart to dare to make policies on Afghanistan based on international rules and relegation, and to end the differences and make the distance between us shorter and choose good relations with Afghanistan.”</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/12 Civilian deaths rose as secret unit hit ISIS</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/12/us/civilian-deaths-war-isis.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/12/us/civilian-deaths-war-isis.html</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>A single top secret American strike cell launched tens of thousands of bombs and missiles against the Islamic State in Syria, but in the process of hammering a vicious enemy, the shadowy force sidestepped safeguards and repeatedly killed civilians, according to multiple current and former military and intelligence officials.</p> <p>The unit was called Talon Anvil, and it worked in three shifts around the clock between 2014 and 2019, pinpointing targets for the United States’ formidable air power to hit: convoys, car bombs, command centers and squads of enemy fighters.</p> <p>But people who worked with the strike cell say in the rush to destroy enemies, it circumvented rules imposed to protect noncombatants, and alarmed its partners in the military and the C.I.A. by killing people who had no role in the conflict: farmers trying to harvest, children in the street, families fleeing fighting, and villagers sheltering in buildings.</p> <p>Talon Anvil was small — at times fewer than 20 people operating from anonymous rooms cluttered with flat screens — but it played an outsize role in the 112,000 bombs and missiles launched against the Islamic State, in part because it embraced a loose interpretation of the military’s rules of engagement.</p> <p>“They were ruthlessly efficient and good at their jobs,” said one former Air Force intelligence officer who worked on hundreds of classified Talon Anvil missions from 2016 to 2018. “But they also made a lot of bad strikes.”</p> <p>The military billed the air war against the Islamic State as the most precise and humane in military history, and said strict rules and oversight by top leaders kept civilian deaths to a minimum despite a ferocious pace of bombing. In reality, four current and former military officials say, the majority of strikes were ordered not by top leaders but by relatively low-ranking U.S. Army Delta Force commandos in Talon Anvil.</p> <p>The New York Times reported last month that a Special Operations bombing run in 2019 killed dozens of women and children, and that the aftermath was concealed from the public and top military leaders. In November, Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III ordered a high-level investigation into the strike, which was carried out by Talon Anvil.</p> <p>But people who saw the task force operate firsthand say the 2019 strike was part of a pattern of reckless strikes that started years earlier.</p> <p>When presented with The Times’ findings, several current and former senior Special Operations officers denied any widespread pattern of reckless airstrikes by the strike cell and disregard for limiting civilian casualties. Capt. Bill Urban, a spokesman for the military’s Central Command, which oversees operations in Syria, declined to comment.</p>

As bad strikes mounted, the four military officials said, Talon Anvil's partners sounded the alarm. Pilots over Syria at times refused to drop bombs because Talon Anvil wanted to hit questionable targets in densely populated areas. Senior C.I.A. officers complained to Special Operations leaders about the disturbing pattern of strikes. Air Force teams doing intelligence work argued with Talon Anvil over a secure phone known as the red line. And even within Talon Anvil, some members at times refused to participate in strikes targeting people who did not seem to be in the fight.

The four officials worked in different parts of the war effort, but all interacted directly with Talon Anvil on hundreds of strikes and soon grew concerned with its way of operating. They reported what they were seeing to immediate superiors and the command overseeing the air war, but say they were ignored.

The former Air Force intelligence officer, who worked almost daily on missions from 2016 to 2018, said he notified the main Air Force operations center in the region about civilian casualties several times, including after a March 2017 strike when Talon Anvil dropped a 500-pound bomb on a building where about 50 people were sheltering. But he said leaders seemed reluctant to scrutinize a strike cell that was driving the offensive on the battlefield.

Every year that the strike cell operated, the civilian casualty rate in Syria increased significantly, according to Larry Lewis, a former Pentagon and State Department adviser who was one of the authors of a 2018 Defense Department report on civilian harm. Mr. Lewis, who has viewed the Pentagon's classified civilian casualty data for Syria, said the rate was 10 times that of similar operations he tracked in Afghanistan.

"It was much higher than I would have expected from a U.S. unit," Mr. Lewis said. "The fact that it increased dramatically and steadily over a period of years shocked me."

Mr. Lewis said commanders enabled the tactics by failing to emphasize the importance of reducing civilian casualties, and that Gen. Stephen J. Townsend, who commanded the offensive against the Islamic State in 2016 and 2017, was dismissive of widespread reports from news media and human rights organizations describing the mounting toll.

In a telephone interview, General Townsend, who now heads the military's Africa Command, said outside organizations that tracked civilian harm claims often did not vet allegations rigorously enough. But he strongly denied that he didn't take civilian casualties seriously. "There's nothing further from the truth," said General Townsend, who added that as commander he ordered monthly civilian casualty reports in Iraq and Syria be made public. He blamed any civilian casualties on "the misfortunes of war" and not because "we didn't care."

With few Americans on the ground, it was difficult to get reliable counts of civilian deaths, according to Gen. Joseph L. Votel, the head of the military's Central Command at the time, and General Townsend's boss.

"Our ability to get out and look after a strike was extraordinarily limited — it was an imperfect system," General Votel said in a telephone interview. "But I believe we always took this seriously and tried to do our best."

### **Tips, Intercepts and Strikes**

Officially, Talon Anvil never existed. Nearly everything it did was highly classified. The strike cell's actions in Syria were gleaned from descriptions of top secret reports and interviews with current and former military personnel who interacted with the group and who discussed it on the condition that they not be named.

The strike cell was run by a classified Special Operations unit called Task Force 9 that oversaw the ground offensive in Syria. The task force had multiple missions. Army Green Berets trained allied Syrian Kurdish and Arab forces. Small groups of Delta Force operators embedded with ground forces, and an assault team of Delta commandos were on call to launch ground raids on high-value targets, including the Islamic State leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.



Most of the firepower, though, was run by Talon Anvil. It worked out of bland office spaces, first in Erbil, Iraq, and then, as the war progressed, in Syria, at a shuttered cement plant in the north, and at a housing complex near the Iraqi border called Green Village, former task force members said.

The cell used tips from allied ground forces, secret electronic intercepts, drone cameras and other information to find enemy targets, then hit them with munitions from drones or called in strikes from other coalition aircraft. It also coordinated air support for allied Kurdish and Arab forces fighting on the ground.

Outwardly, the operators showed few signs that they were military, said a former task force member who worked with the strike cell during the height of the war in 2017. They used first names and no rank or uniforms, and many had bushy beards and went to work in shorts and footwear that included Crocs and Birkenstocks. But from their strike room, they controlled a fleet of Predator and Reaper drones that bristled with precision Hellfire missiles and laser-guided bombs.

The task force had a second strike cell that worked with the C.I.A. to hunt high-value Islamic State leaders. It used similar tools, but often tracked a target for days or weeks, and accounted for a fraction of the strikes.

Both cells were created in 2014 when the Islamic State had overrun large parts of Iraq and Syria. Within a few years, the self-declared caliphate was attacking allies in the Middle East and launching terrorist attacks in Europe. The United States was desperate for a force that could identify enemy targets, and put Delta Force in charge.

Early in the American-led offensive, which was known as Operation Inherent Resolve, the military struggled to function at “the speed of war,” as only high-ranking generals from outside Delta could approve strikes, according to a RAND Corporation report on the air war. Seventy-four percent of sorties returned without dropping any weapons, and the offensive began to stall.

Tactics changed late in 2016 when General Townsend took command and, in an attempt to keep pace with a rapidly expanding offensive, moved the authority to approve strikes down to the level of on-scene commanders.

Within Task Force 9, that authority was effectively pushed even lower, a senior official with extensive experience in Iraq and Syria said, to the senior enlisted Delta operator on shift in the strike room — usually a sergeant first class or master sergeant.

Under the new rules, the strike cell was still required to follow a process of intelligence gathering and risk mitigation to limit harm to civilians before launching a strike. That often meant flying drones over targets for hours to make sure the cell could positively identify enemies and determine whether civilians were in the area.

But the Delta operators were under enormous pressure to protect allied ground troops and move the offensive forward, the former task force member said, and felt hobbled by the safeguards. So in early 2017, they found a way to strike more quickly: self-defense.

Most of Operation Inherent Resolve’s restrictions applied only to offensive strikes. There were far fewer restrictions for defensive strikes that were meant to protect allied forces under imminent threat of harm. So Talon Anvil began claiming that nearly every strike was in self-defense, which enabled them to move quickly with little second-guessing or oversight, even if their targets were miles from any fighting, two former task force members said.

The classified rules of engagement warned that self-defense strikes should not be used to circumvent the more restrictive rules for offensive strikes, two officers with knowledge of the rules said. But for Talon Anvil, there was a tenuous logic to the tactic, one of the former task force members said. If defense rules allowed Talon Anvil to attack an enemy target on the front lines, then why not the same type of target 10

or even 100 miles away that might one day be on the front lines? Soon Talon Anvil was justifying nearly every strike as defensive.

“It’s more expedient to resort to self-defense,” said Mr. Lewis, the former Pentagon adviser. “It’s easier to get approved.”

But speeding up strikes meant less time to gather intelligence and sort enemy fighters from civilians, and the four former military personnel who worked with Talon Anvil said that too often the cell relied on flimsy intelligence from Kurdish and Arab ground forces or rushed to attack with little regard to who might be nearby.

One former task force member said the vast majority of Talon Anvil’s strikes killed only enemy fighters, but that the Delta operators in the strike cell were biased toward hitting and often decided something was an enemy target when there was scant supporting evidence. Part of the problem, he said, was that operators, who rotated through roughly every four months, were trained as elite commandos but had little experience running a strike cell. In addition, he said, the daily demands of overseeing strike after strike seemed to erode operators’ perspective and fray their humanity.

The former Air Force intelligence officer said he saw so many civilian deaths as a result of Talon Anvil’s tactics citing self-defense that he eventually grew jaded and accepted them as part of the job. Even still, some attacks stood out.

In one, he said, Talon Anvil followed three men, all with canvas bags, working in an olive grove near the city of Manbij in the fall of 2016. The men had no weapons, and were not near any fighting, but the strike cell insisted they must be enemy fighters and killed them with a missile.

In another, as civilians were trying to flee fighting in the city of Raqqa in June 2017, scores of people boarded makeshift ferries to cross the Euphrates River. He said the task force claimed the ferries were carrying enemy fighters, and he watched on high-definition video as it hit multiple boats, killing at least 30 civilians, whose bodies drifted away in the green water.

A senior military official with direct knowledge of the task force said that what counted as an “imminent threat” was extremely subjective and Talon Anvil’s senior Delta operators were given broad authority to launch defensive strikes. At times, the official acknowledged, that led to bad strikes, and those who showed poor judgment were removed. But the official emphasized these instances were rare.

### **Fighters, or Children?**

As airstrikes escalated in 2017, a broad array of U.S. partners working with the strike cell grew troubled by its tactics.

The C.I.A. had officers embedded in Task Force 9 to supply intelligence on Islamic State leaders and coordinate strikes. The agency was pursuing high-value individuals, and often tracked them for days using multiple drones, waiting to strike when civilian deaths could be minimized.

The task force did not always like to wait, two former C.I.A. officers said. C.I.A. personnel were shocked when they repeatedly saw the group strike with little regard for civilians. Officers reported their concerns to the Department of Defense’s Inspector General, and the agency’s leadership discussed the issue with top officers at the Joint Special Operations Command, one former C.I.A. officer said.

The officer said he never saw evidence that these concerns were taken seriously.

A C.I.A. spokesman declined to comment.

Talon Anvil also clashed at times with the Air Force intelligence teams based in the United States that helped to analyze the torrent of footage from drones. The Delta operators would push analysts to say they saw evidence such as weapons that could legally justify a strike, even when there was none, the former Air

Force intelligence officer said. If one analyst did not see what Delta wanted, Delta would ask for a different one.

Delta Force and analysts sometimes argued over whether figures in the sights of a drone were fighters or children, one of the former task force members said.

All of the footage from the strikes is stored by the military. In an apparent attempt to blunt criticism and undercut potential investigations, Talon Anvil started directing drone cameras away from targets shortly before a strike hit, preventing the collection of video evidence, the former Air Force intelligence officer and one of the former task force members said.

Another Air Force officer, who reviewed dozens of task force strikes where civilians were reportedly killed, said that drone crews were trained to keep cameras on targets so the military could assess damage. Yet he frequently saw cameras jerk away at key moments, as if hit by a wind gust. It was only after seeing the pattern over and over, he said, that he began to believe it was done on purpose.

### **A Hunt for Targets**

One morning before dawn in early March 2017, Talon Anvil sent a Predator drone over a Syrian farming town called Karama to cripple enemy positions in the area in preparation for an offensive by allies a week later.

For the former Air Force intelligence officer, the mission stands out as an example of Talon Anvil's flawed way of operating, and how military leaders seemed to look the other way.

At about 4 a.m., he said, the drone arrived over the town's flat-roofed houses. His Air Force intelligence team was watching from a secure operations center in the United States. A Talon Anvil operator typed a message into the chat room the cell shared with intelligence analysts: All civilians have fled the area. Anyone left is an enemy fighter. Find lots of targets for us today because we want to go Winchester.

Going Winchester meant expending all of the drone's missiles and 500-pound bombs.

As the drone circled, the town appeared to be asleep, the former officer said. Even with infrared sensors, the team did not see movement. Talon Anvil focused in on a building and typed in the chat that a tip from ground forces indicated that the building was an enemy training center. Sensors suggested an enemy cellphone or radio might be in the neighborhood but was unable to pinpoint it to a single block, let alone a single building.

Talon Anvil did not wait for confirmation, and ordered a self-defense strike, the former officer said. The Predator dropped a 500-pound bomb through the roof.

As the smoke cleared, the former officer said, his team stared at their screens in dismay. The infrared cameras showed women and children staggering out of the partly collapsed building, some missing limbs, some dragging the dead.

The intelligence analysts began taking screen shots and tallying the casualties. They sent an initial battle damage assessment to Talon Anvil: 23 dead or severely wounded, 30 lightly wounded, very likely civilians. Talon Anvil paused only long enough to acknowledge the message, the former officer said, then pressed on to the next target.

The former Air Force officer said he immediately reported the civilian casualties to Operation Inherent Resolve's operations center, then called the center's liaison officer on the red line. He said he never heard back and saw no evidence that any action was ever taken.

Operation Inherent Resolve made a commitment to investigate and report every case of civilian casualties publicly, but nothing in its reports matches the incident. The true toll of the strike in Karama remains uncertain.

	<p>During a five-day window in early March, Operation Inherent Resolve acknowledged that it launched 47 strikes in the region. Satellite images from the time show extensive damage to at least a dozen buildings, including the building that the former officer said he saw bombed. Local media reported that airstrikes in Karama on March 8 and 9 killed between seven and 14 people and wounded 18.</p> <p>For two years after the strikes, Operation Inherent Resolve said it could not confirm any civilian casualties in the town. Then, in 2019, it acknowledged that one man had been wounded when the coalition struck an enemy fighting position. It gave coordinates a block from the building the former Air Force intelligence officer said he saw destroyed.</p> <p>In response to questions from The Times this month, a Special Operations official acknowledged its strike cell had hit targets in the town on March 8 and killed 16 fighters, but denied that any civilians had died.</p> <p>No outside group has ever investigated the secret strike, and it is unclear what steps the military took to determine what happened. The former officer said no military investigators ever contacted him.</p> <p>The evidence from the strike — the chat room records, bombing coordinates and video — is stored on government servers, the former officer said. But because of the secrecy surrounding Talon Anvil, all of it is classified.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 Racists, Taliban supporters Twitter new audio</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/12/10/twitter-turmoil-spaces/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/12/10/twitter-turmoil-spaces/</a>
GIST	<p>Earlier this year, as Twitter raced to roll out Spaces, its new live audio chat feature, some employees asked how the company planned to make sure the service didn't become a platform for hate speech, bullying and calls to violence.</p> <p>In fact, there was no plan. In a presentation to colleagues shortly before its <a href="#">public launch in May</a>, a top Twitter executive, Kayvon Beykpour, acknowledged that people were likely to break Twitter's rules in the audio chats, according to an attendee who spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe internal matters. But he and other Twitter executives — convinced that Spaces would help revive the sluggish company — refused to slow down.</p> <p>Fast forward six months and those problems have become reality. Taliban supporters, white nationalists, and anti-vaccine activists sowing <a href="#">coronavirus</a> misinformation have hosted live audio broadcasts on Spaces that hundreds of people have tuned in to, according to researchers, users and screenshots viewed by The Washington Post. Other Spaces conversations have <a href="#">disparaged transgender people and Black Americans</a>. These chats are neither policed nor moderated by Twitter, the company acknowledges, because it does not have human moderators or technology that can scan audio in real-time.</p> <p>"Dear @TwitterSafety, ISIS recruiters are active on Twitter Spaces. They are openly inciting genocide of Shiite people," <a href="#">wrote one Twitter user</a> in late November, who included a short recorded clip of a Spaces chat where a user made derogatory comments about Shiite Muslims. Two people who participated in the hour-long conversation, including an Afghan journalist, told The Washington Post that the host declared support for the Islamic State terrorist group and said that Shiite Muslims deserved to die.</p> <p>The botched launch of Spaces is a sign of how ongoing turmoil at Twitter is causing it to overlook hate, polarization, and extremism — and to repeat the mistakes that have long plagued Silicon Valley companies. Twitter in particular has struggled under absentee leadership in recent years. Last week, <a href="#">CEO Jack Dorsey unexpectedly resigned</a> amid a campaign by investors to innovate more rapidly.</p> <p>That investor pressure led the company to "ship fast and learn in public" — pushing out products before they are tested for safety, current and former employees who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters said. It's an ethos that has often backfired on social platforms, including as recently as October, when <a href="#">a Facebook whistleblower came forward</a> with documents showing the social</p>

media giant was aware of the societal harms its products caused. In many instances, it pressed forward with them anyway.

Now, as social media companies charge into new arenas — from audio to virtual reality to cryptocurrency — they are at risk of not implementing the lessons of the past. Even before Spaces was launched to Twitter's more than 200 million daily users, employees began raising alarms about the potential for live audio broadcasts to be used to sow hate and extremism. But those who called for Twitter to slow down have been sidelined by managers, according to four current and former employees who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters.

Twitter's new CEO, Parag Agrawal, wasted no time in announcing a [major reorganization of the company](#) last week. He jettisoned two executives — including one who had been brought in to "[detoxify the platform](#)" — while consolidating power over the company's core products under the hard-charging Beykpour. None of those products is more central to the company's growth strategy than Spaces, according to the employees, where Twitter believes it has a chance to become a leader in the hot new medium of live audio.

"Ensuring people's safety and encouraging healthy conversations, while helping hosts and listeners to control their experience, have been key priorities since the beginning of [Spaces'] development," said spokeswoman Viviana Wiewall, who acknowledged the lack of real-time moderation for audio. "We're exploring avenues in this regard, but it's not something that we have available at this time."

Wiewall noted that technology that could scan audio in real-time either did not currently exist or was in nascent stages. But she said some defenses against harmful audio content exist. That includes using existing software that detects problematic keywords — such as racist slurs — to scan the titles of Spaces chats, as well as depending on users to report potential rule-breaking content.

But this safety system has already failed to detect several harmful and rule-breaking Spaces, including one hosted by users in November titled, "lets be honest, tr@nswomen are born dishonest, frauds, liars, and deceivers" and another called "Ask a White Nationalist anything."

A third — entitled in part "Blck PPL deserve NUFFIN" — which was attended by 400 listeners in November, likely got around keyword detection because another part of the title misspelled the n-word.

Worse, Twitter's software mistakenly helped some of these conversations go viral. The company's software identified the chats as popular because many listeners were tuning into them, and as a result promoted them to more users. Wiewall acknowledged the issue and blamed it on a software "bug" that she said had been addressed.

"Dumpster fire does not even describe" the way Spaces was managed, said a former member of that team. They added that chaotic and arrogant leadership led to the problems. "When you work on something for months and no one is gathering any findings about how bad people might use this, well then it's not shocking that months later you have Taliban or racists using the platform."

The current and former employees said other products have also been rushed out too hastily amid renewed Wall Street pressure to grow: A service called Tip Jar, which allows Twitter users to give payments to other users who post content such as performances or comedy stand-up routines, ended up invading people's privacy when it [inadvertently exposed people's home addresses](#) shortly after its launch in May. Twitter said the issue was PayPal's fault but it subsequently added a warning label letting people know their personal information could be exposed.

As tech giants foray into new territories, experts and lawmakers say that they have not resolved their current problems and could further amplify them with newer, less-moderated technologies.

"Twitter spent six years creating a strong set of procedures to take dangerous content off its platform. And then it created a whole new platform where those procedures don't work," said Emerson Brooking, a

resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensics Lab who studies how extremists use social media. "Spaces is totally ungoverned."

### **The race to audio**

Twitter raced to develop its audio tool last year amid intense competition from an upstart audio chat competitor called Clubhouse. The rival enabled a panel of speakers in a virtual "room" to hold a live conversation. Audience members can be invited by the hosts "onstage."

Launched in March 2020, Clubhouse boomed to 10 million active users as celebrities and others turned to audio for the sort of intimate, spontaneous conversations and interactive live events that were no longer possible during the pandemic.

Around the same time, activist investors from the hedge fund Elliott Management gained a large stake in Twitter and a seat on the company's board. Elliott campaigned to oust Dorsey and had issued a list of demands that Twitter pick up the pace of product development, which had stagnated in recent years.

Soon, Spaces — a nascent experiment at the time — was moved to the number 1 slot on the company's priority road map. By early 2021, Beykpour had reassigned over 100 people to work on Spaces — versus roughly a dozen in 2020. He had turned to a friend and former colleague at the live-video streaming start-up Periscope, Alex Khoshnevisan, to lead Spaces.

But conflicts arose early on. In the first months of 2021, the product was in "beta" mode as Twitter tested it with a small number of power users. People involved in Spaces say that Khoshnevisan was a disorganized and mercurial manager who was more focused on creating a vision than on the day-to-day work of building the audio tool. They say he was reluctant to share information and would go on abstract rants. In one document obtained by The Post, the subject line of an email from him about the project was a "murmuration of starlings."

As the company got ready to launch Spaces to Twitter users with over 600 followers in May, employees began asking whether Spaces would deploy technological tools to scan audio for rule violations.

Twitter, like Facebook and YouTube, has built extensive tools in recent years to spot slurs, deep fakes, bots, and disinformation networks. The companies also employ third-party moderators — Twitter has over 2,000 of them today — to read posts and enforce rules.

The employees were told, however, that the technology to do so for Spaces did not exist and the small number of human moderators was incapable of listening to tens of thousands of conversations in multiple languages in real-time. People who suggested that the company should slow down to build better safety technology were dismissed or excluded from meetings, according to three of the employees. One of them recalled at least five different meetings where the lack of moderation was raised as a problem to Khoshnevisan and other managers.

As Spaces finally launched, Khoshnevisan sent another memo describing a host of problems. He lamented that "@TwitterSpace has lost its fearless, open, and transparent communication." He also said he was disappointed and that people needed to do better. "We can definitely do this — please consider this a call for help and collaboration."

But months into the public launch, the number of people listening to Spaces was trending downward — dropping to below a million in July from more than 1.5 million in May, according to an internal chart obtained by The Post.

Khoshnevisan demanded that the team quintuple the number of listeners by the end of the year after seeing those numbers. "We need to be moving with extreme urgency — existential urgency, like Spaces depends on it, because it does," he wrote in another note obtained by The Post. "At this rate Spaces will not exist in six months, and not just as a figure of speech."

Twitter's Wiewall said she had no comment on the internal dynamics or on Khoshnevisan. He declined to comment.

In a statement after this story published, Wiewall said that the moderation plan for Spaces also included prioritizing reports of problematic audio conversations for review, and that the company had created a separate team to moderate audio after it receives reports. It says it is working on building technological tools to enforce its rules proactively.

### **The Wild West**

In August, as the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan, the militant Islamist insurgency, the Taliban, took over the country's government. Social media companies had to decide whether to ban the group, which has conducted public beheadings of its enemies and engaged in violence against women.

Facebook continued to ban the Taliban, but Twitter [allowed the organization](#) to maintain an official presence as the de facto government. The company said it would continue to enforce its rules against any violating content posted by the Taliban or their supporters.

Soon after the takeover, Taliban supporters around the world started creating Spaces, hosting dozens of conversations in English and Pashto to gain support for the militant group, said the Atlantic Council's Brookings. In some conversations he listened to, he said, people would discuss conspiracy theories about the terrorist attacks of 9/11, while others were openly anti-Semitic. At times, cryptocurrency enthusiasts would join the conversations to encourage the Taliban to use cryptocurrency to bypass the global financial system. In other cases, white nationalists would hop on to pro-Taliban Spaces to make negative comments about Israel and Jews.

Twitter prohibits language that dehumanizes people on the basis of religion and national origin. It also prohibits using its platform to "further" illegal activities, such as money laundering.

Brookings said he was shocked because Twitter appeared to be enforcing its policies against pro-Taliban tweets — policies that he agreed with — but ignoring dozens of audio chats where rules were being broken and ideas that were known to radicalize people spread. Twitter also did not allow Spaces to be recorded, making it nearly impossible for researchers to track what was said. (Twitter has since allowed recording and says it also saves audio on its own servers for up to 90 days.)

By fall, other extremists, including white nationalists and conspiracy theorists, were starting to host and promote Spaces, said Rita Katz, executive director of SITE Intelligence Group.

Some users reporting problems contacted by The Post said the company was too slow to respond.

Last month, a Twitter user screenshotted and posted eight different pro-Taliban forums in a bid to gain the company's attention. "As Taliban members are always using Twitter 'spaces' to hold meetings, I'm just going to screenshot everyday until somebody does something about it," the user tweeted. The person, who said his name was Alex Gomez and that he was a graduate student in biostatistics at Florida International University, said Twitter did not immediately delete many of the accounts he had flagged — enabling the same people to create new audio conversations every day.

At this point, a full-blown debate was taking place at Twitter, with employees at team meetings flagging pro-Taliban Spaces due to the risk of allowing a known extremist group to use Spaces unmoderated.

Extremists, including the far-right in the U.S., are known to be early adopters of emerging technologies, experts said. Clubhouse was plagued with [similar problems](#).

"This is straight out of their playbook," said Colin P. Clarke, research director at the Soufan Group, who studies terrorists. "They're going to extract every bit of recruitment and propaganda out of it before it gets taken away."



Spaces was also being used by pro-democracy activists and dissidents in both Hong Kong and Iran, the experts noted.

Sarah T. Roberts, professor at UCLA's Center for Critical Internet Inquiry, said the Spaces problems reminded her of a pattern of similar mistakes by tech companies. Facebook raced, in 2015, to launch live video streaming, she said. Soon, people were filming themselves committing suicide, and murders and mass shootings were posted live.

"Audio is the wild West," she said.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 Canadian ISIS propagandist pleads guilty</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-vb/2021/12/10/khalifa-isis-guilty/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-vb/2021/12/10/khalifa-isis-guilty/</a>
GIST	<p>A Canadian propagandist for the Islamic State, hunted by international authorities for years, pleaded guilty in Alexandria, Va., federal court to terrorism charges only two months after being brought to the United States for prosecution.</p> <p>The case is an unusual one in that Mohammed Khalifa, 38, is not from the United States or accused of involvement in any direct attacks on U.S. citizens. But he agreed in court Friday that he conspired to provide material support to a terrorism organization that resulted in death. He is set to be sentenced April 15; sentencing guidelines call for a term of life in prison.</p> <p>Although Khalifa's identity was unknown until his capture in 2019, his voice was infamous — he narrated English-language videos encouraging Westerners to join the Islamic State or commit acts of terrorism at home. The FBI <a href="#">first asked</a> for help identifying him in 2014. Should he get a sentence of less than life in prison, prosecutors said he would probably be deported to Canada.</p> <p>Khalifa was born in Saudi Arabia and moved with his family to Italy and then Toronto, according to court records. He was not religious until after high school, he <a href="#">told the Canadian Broadcasting Corp.</a> in 2019, when he started studying at a local mosque. While getting a degree in computer systems technology, he started following radical Islamic content online. He came across the videos of <a href="#">Anwar al-Awlaki</a>, an American Muslim preacher who had joined al-Qaeda and encouraged other Westerners to join him in violent jihad. Those lectures, according to court records, convinced Khalifa to travel to Syria and join the Islamic State.</p> <p>According to the court record, Khalifa left home in August 2013. He told his family he was going to Egypt; only after arriving did he admit he was in Syria "to join the mujahideen" against dictator Bashar al-Assad.</p> <p>Khalifa assumed he would be a fighter and bought an AK-47 upon arrival in Syria, prosecutors said. But because he spoke both English and Arabic, Khalifa spent only a brief period battling government forces outside Aleppo before being asked to translate and produce propaganda. Eventually, he became head of all English-language media for the Islamic State, according to his plea agreement.</p> <p>Among the videos he narrated was "<a href="#">Flames of War</a>" in 2014 and a 2017 sequel, "Flames of War II: Until the Final Hour," in which Syrian prisoners were forced to dig their own graves before being shot and killed on camera. In both videos, Khalifa admitted in court, he was among the masked Islamic State members who killed the prisoners of war.</p> <p>Both films, prosecutors say, became touchstones for ISIS recruits from Australia, Europe and the United States.</p> <p>He also admitted overseeing an international network of Islamic State supporters who translated the group's propaganda into various languages.</p> <p>Khalifa worked within the media operation until late 2018. As the Islamic State lost ground to Kurdish forces in Syria, he again took up arms despite being told to flee. In January 2019, armed with an AK-47</p>

	<p>and three hand grenades, he attacked a home in Abu Badran where Syrian Defense Forces soldiers stood on the roof. During the attack, his weapon jammed and he was injured by a Syrian Defense Forces soldier and <a href="#">taken prisoner</a>. He was transferred to U.S. custody in September.</p> <p>The plea comes a few weeks before another Westerner goes to trial in Alexandria on charges of involvement in some of the Islamic State's most horrifying acts of violence. El Shafee Elsheikh, a British citizen, is <a href="#">accused of</a> helping keep hostage aid workers and journalists whose deaths were filmed and broadcast online.</p> <p>Khalifa defended those killings, according to prosecutors, saying in an online chat that "being a civilian or journo or aid worker means nothing" in the Islamic State.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 Inside the fall of Kabul</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/10/magazine/fall-of-kabul-afghanistan.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/10/magazine/fall-of-kabul-afghanistan.html</a>
GIST	<p><b>Part 1</b> <b>The Withdrawal</b></p> <p>After dark on a mild July evening, I made my way through a heavily fortified neighborhood in downtown Kabul. Over the years, the capital's elite had retreated deeper behind concrete walls topped with concertina wire; sometimes they even added a layer of Hesco barriers on the sidewalk, forcing me into the street as I passed. I buzzed at the home of a former government official, went inside and climbed the marble stairs to a rooftop party. I'd been to a few of his gatherings over the years, some of them raucous with laughter and dancing, but this was a quiet affair, with a small group of Afghan men and women, mostly young and stylishly dressed, sitting in a circle under the lamplight.</p> <p>The mood was grim. In recent weeks, large areas of the north, places that had not historically supported the Taliban, had suddenly fallen. A new assessment by the U.S. intelligence community predicted that the republic could collapse as soon as six months after the last American forces left. Yet President Biden was pressing ahead with the withdrawal. That very night, American troops were <a href="#">flying out of Bagram Air Field</a>, the giant base north of the capital where the United States had built a prison to house detainees.</p> <p>I greeted the guests in Persian, and when I was introduced by the host as a foreign journalist, they fell silent. "Tell us what you think is going to happen to Afghanistan," a young woman said, turning to me. She added sarcastically, "We've probably said the same things already, but we believe them when we hear them from a foreigner."</p> <p>Like many people in Washington and Kabul, I thought six months was overly pessimistic. The government had a considerable advantage in men, weapons and equipment, and it still held the cities. Surely, I said, Afghanistan's power brokers, fractious and corrupt as they were, would unite and rally their forces for their own survival.</p> <p>As civilians, the guests at the party faced a stark question that summer, which they repeated to me: <i>Berim ya bashim?</i> Should we stay or should we go? Afghans had endured the agony of displacement and exile for 40 years; the latest wave began in 2014 at the end of the U.S. troop surge, which was followed by an economic recession and the steady loss of territory to the Taliban. The following year, when Europe's borders collapsed and a million people crossed the Mediterranean in boats, Afghans were the second-largest group among them, after Syrians.</p> <p>But the people at this party weren't likely to cross the mountains or sea with smugglers. Some had studied abroad and returned; others had no intention of leaving, like Zaki Daryabi, publisher of the scrappy independent paper Etilaat-e Roz, which had become known for exposing corruption within the administration of President Ashraf Ghani. Some were waiting for a chance to leave legally, with dignity, for work or school. Yet opportunities for Afghans were rare; they had the worst passports in the world when it came to travel without a visa. Now they were faced with the prospect of becoming refugees.</p>

“I have seven visas in my passport — I can leave,” an older Afghan businessman said. “What about the guy who has no chance, who just has a little house and a little shop?”

“One of them’s me,” Zaki said as he stood up for refreshments. He tapped himself on the chest and grinned ruefully. “One of them’s me.”

The Taliban were advancing on the capital, but the prospect of a peace deal frightened many of the guests, as much as the continuation of the war, which had mostly afflicted the countryside. At the insistence of the United States, negotiations between the government and the Taliban were underway in Doha, and a power-sharing agreement that would bring the Taliban to Kabul was seen as a disaster by the urban groups that had benefited from the republic’s relative liberalism and international support, particularly working women.

At the insistence of the guests, a young poet, Ramin Mazhar, stood to read. Slender and stooped, Ramin had a gentle manner that belied his ferocious iconoclasm. Many of his poems, which he posted on Instagram, could be considered blasphemous by fundamentalists. I asked him earlier whether he had published any printed volumes. “No,” he said, smiling. “They’d kill me.”

He recited several of his poems; one, set to music by a singer named Ghawgha Taban, had become an anthem for Kabul’s progressives. After Ramin was finished reading, someone put the song on the stereo, and the guests sang along from the rooftop, their voices growing louder:

*You are pious, your kisses are your prayer.  
You are different, your kisses are your protest.  
You are not afraid of love, of hope, of tomorrow.  
I kiss you amid the Taliban, you are not afraid!*

**The day before**, I went to see Rangina Hamidi, Afghanistan’s acting minister of education, at her home in Kabul. We were in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic’s third wave, which had filled the hospitals with gasping patients, and the government had closed schools in response; Rangina herself was still recovering from an earlier bout with the virus. She coughed a little as she greeted me on the lawn, where her daughter’s pet goat, Vinegar, stood watching us.

“I’m still having trouble with my memory,” she told me. There were gaps in the lost year. Rangina had returned to work at the ministry, but she felt isolated, part of a political class confined to guarded compounds and armored cars.

In the living room, I embraced her husband, Abdullah, and marveled at how tall their daughter, Zara, who was in fifth grade, had gotten. She was just a baby when I met the family almost a decade ago in Kandahar, the Pashtun heartland that was the birthplace of the Taliban. I used to visit their home during my reporting trips there. I admired Rangina’s ability to bridge two worlds, as a driven entrepreneur who founded a handicraft collective and a woman enmeshed in the social life of Kandahar, one of the most gender-segregated cultures on the planet.

There were few women like Rangina in high office. She was born in Kandahar, but her family, escaping the Communist regime, had gone to the United States as refugees in the 1980s, when Rangina was a child. She majored in women’s studies and religion at the University of Virginia and considered herself a proud feminist; that was also when she chose to start wearing the hijab, which strengthened her connection to her faith.

Her father, Ghulam Haider, an accountant by trade, raised her to pursue the same opportunities in life as a man. He was her hero growing up. When she moved back in 2003 to help in the reconstruction of their country, he was inspired to follow her. At first, they were full of hope. She met Abdullah, an engineer, and founded the handicrafts cooperative; her father became Kandahar’s mayor as the streets filled with American soldiers and the war intensified. In 2011, he was assassinated by a suicide bomber.

We sat down for dinner around a tablecloth spread on the carpet, and Rangina heaped my plate with samosas. “Thank you, Madam Minister,” I teased, and we laughed. She told us the story of how she ended up in the cabinet. Four years earlier, she moved to Kabul after a friend recruited her as the first principal of Mezan, a coed private school that offered an international English curriculum. After a couple of years, the school’s success had attracted the capital’s elite. That, she believed, was why she received a call last year from the president. She thought Ghani wanted to know about Mezan’s online learning programs for the pandemic; instead, he asked her to become his minister of education. Shocked, she asked for time to think.

Until then, Rangina had resisted joining the Afghan government; it was dominated by warlords who, she believed, were responsible for killing her father, more so than the Taliban. Those who took part became corrupt themselves, or else were hounded into leaving. But Rangina had long admired Ghani, who as minister of finance in the early years of the republic acquired a reputation as a brilliant technocrat, arrogant but personally incorruptible. When she met him in person at the palace, she was enthralled by his intellect and his vision for reform — a true patriot, she thought. Even his infamous temper reminded her of her father, who didn’t suffer fools.

Praising her work at Mezan, Ghani told her he wanted someone who could help him modernize Afghanistan’s outdated curriculum. Rangina believed that the cultural gap that had grown between the cities and the countryside could be bridged by marrying a traditional version of Islam — one that drew on great Afghan scholars like the poet Rumi — to contemporary teaching practices. When she said yes, she became Afghanistan’s first female education minister since the Communists, who brought radical new opportunities for women to go to school and work in the cities, gains that were wiped out after they were overthrown by American-backed Islamists in 1992. The Taliban, who took power four years later, instituted a ban on girls’ education after puberty. As a result of the American invasion in 2001, an entire generation of Afghan girls had gone to schools and worked at jobs that had been denied to their mothers — an entanglement between the military presence and women’s rights symbolized by a mural outside the U.S. Embassy depicting the girls’ robotics team alongside the American flag.

With American troops finally leaving, that progress was now at risk. In many areas controlled by the Taliban, which they called the Islamic Emirate, girls were only allowed to attend school until sixth grade, which Rangina’s daughter would enter next year.

**The American withdrawal** that had brought the republic to the brink of collapse began in February 2020. That month, the chief negotiator for the United States, Zalmay Khalilzad, dressed in a navy suit, sat at a table in Doha, Qatar, beside his turbaned Taliban counterpart, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, signing copies of a document titled “The Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan.” President Donald Trump, who came into office intent on ending the United States’ longest war, had appointed Khalilzad, an Afghan-born, naturalized U.S. citizen who previously served as ambassador in Kabul.

Afghan government officials were notably absent from the table in Doha — the Taliban had long refused to negotiate with what they considered a puppet regime. But, as a result of the deal, in exchange for U.S. troops being out within 14 months, the Taliban agreed to talks with the republic. Khalilzad and his team had hoped to make the final U.S. withdrawal conditional on peace between the Afghans, but Trump insisted on sticking to the timeline.

Now the vast gulf between republic and emirate had to be bridged. Khalilzad and his team, who believed that Baradar’s side was genuinely interested in reaching a deal, proposed a power-sharing arrangement led by someone “acceptable to both sides” — a definition sure to exclude Ghani. “He hated that, because it means that he has to go,” Khalilzad said of the Afghan president, whom he had known since they were boys. “I didn’t see another way.”

Ghani insisted that he would hand over power only to an elected successor. (He declined to respond to questions.) He proposed a caretaker government and new elections overseen by himself, a nonstarter for the Taliban. But Baradar and his team never offered a concrete counterproposal of their own, insisting instead on a prisoner exchange. Some believed that the Islamists were simply running out the clock until the U.S. forces left.

“The Taliban were not serious about peace,” said Matin Bek, a senior official on the negotiating team. True power within the movement, he thought, resided not with Baradar’s group in Doha but with the military commanders on the ground and the senior leadership hiding in Pakistan. It seemed clear to Bek that the rebels wanted to see if the government could survive on its own before they would accept anything short of outright victory. “If we could put up resistance and stand without the Americans, only then would they enter into real negotiations.”

As the withdrawal progressed and the Taliban gained strength on the battlefield, Ghani grew isolated; allies deserted his government, some with an eye to Khalilzad’s proposed power-sharing arrangement. And so the president came to rely on a shrinking core of trusted aides, who encouraged him to fight the Taliban. Foremost among them was Hamdullah Mohib, the president’s right hand and heir apparent, who, as the national security adviser, controlled much of the information about the war that was presented to the president.

When Ghani selected Mohib to lead the office of the National Security Council in 2018, he had no military or security experience. He had studied computer systems engineering in Britain, where he emigrated as a teenager. In 2009, Mohib helped with Ghani’s first, unsuccessful bid for president, running his website. Five years later, Mohib again volunteered for Ghani, who emerged as the improbable victor from a crowded field, though the disputed result had to be brokered by the United States amid evidence of fraud on all sides. In the West, Ghani was hailed by many as an educated reformer, co-author of the book “Fixing Failed States.”

With Ghani in the palace, Mohib’s rise to power began. The following year, at age 32, he was sent to Washington as Ghani’s ambassador. I got to know him in those days; easygoing and approachable, he seemed successful at the networking the job required, as he lobbied for U.S. support for the war effort. Three years later, Ghani brought him home to coordinate security policy, providing him a house next to his own on the palace grounds; their wives became close, and Mohib’s young children played with the president, who was old enough to be their grandfather.

But Mohib quickly ran into trouble in his new role. As tensions grew between Kabul and Washington over [Trump’s plans for withdrawal](#), Mohib lashed out publicly against Khalilzad, accusing him of seeking personal power as a “viceroy.” Outraged, the Americans froze Mohib out of meetings for a year, and many expected him to lose his job, but the president stuck with him. Eventually, Khalilzad told me, he forgave Mohib at Ghani’s personal request.

Mohib’s team, like much of the Ghani administration, attracted a young cadre that reflected the president’s technocratic values. Favoring tailored suits and speaking excellent English, many were raised or educated abroad, a type that some referred to as “Tommies,” after the brand Tommy Hilfiger. “Young, educated, well-spoken, corrupt,” said Sibghat Ghaznawi, a doctor who had been a Fulbright scholar in the United States with many of them. He said those who succeeded in the palace tended to excel in *chappalasi*, or brown-nosing, and telling their superiors what they wanted to hear. Last year, when Sibghat became a senior adviser to the office of the National Security Council, he said that Mohib warned him not to be too negative with the president. He already knows these things, Mohib told him, so you don’t need to be reporting what he already knows.

**In Afghanistan**, the causes of state weakness preceded the Ghani administration and went deeper than any particular individuals: a 40-year civil war fueled by foreign superpowers, malignant corruption and the Pakistani military’s covert support for the Taliban. Above all, the U.S. occupation had created a state dependent on American troops and foreign money. As the republic entered a downward spiral, Ghani and his team struggled to consolidate their authority, alienating many who supported the republic. “They were always scared that if a potential deal happens between negotiators, they might be pushed out,” Bek said.

Last year, for instance, Ghani ordered Mohib and the security council to review all district police chiefs and governors; ultimately, they replaced a majority, more than 200 of each, in what was seen as a

damaging move in the middle of intensifying violence, one that sidelined local commanders. “The Taliban seized this moment and made peace with those people,” Bek said.

The Islamic Emirate understood a basic lesson from Afghan history, which was that the nation’s wars have often ended with individual commanders switching sides; that was how the Taliban rose to power in the 1990s and how they were defeated in just several weeks in 2001. After they signed a deal with the Americans in Doha, the Taliban promoted a policy of *afwa*, or amnesty, privately reaching out to power brokers with a clear message: The Americans are leaving, the republic is falling, but the Emirate will forgive those who surrender.

In this battle for hearts and minds, the government’s answer was its psychological-warfare program, overseen by Mohib and the security council. For years, the United States and its allies had funded psy-ops for the Afghan forces, spending heavily on advertising with the local news media. According to Afghan officials, the intelligence service, the National Directorate of Security, also made covert payments to Afghan journalists and civil society in exchange for their support. Another initiative was the creation of thousands of fake accounts on Facebook and Twitter dedicated to promoting the government and attacking its critics, work known by the Pashto term *Facebookchalawonky*.

But these messages did not spread much beyond the bubble world of the Kabul elite, where civil society had largely moved online, as demonstrations and events were targeted by terrorist attacks. Afghanistan’s vibrant cyberspace must have been attractive to officials cloistered within blast walls and armored cars, but it failed to capture the reality of the countryside, where only a fraction of the population had access to the internet.

Sibghat, the adviser to the security council, told me that he was surprised how often social media was cited as evidence during meetings, where many made arguments that he considered demonstrably false: that the Taliban were militarily weak, and it was simply that no one was taking proper action against them. That the insurgents could never act independently from Pakistan. Above all, he said, many working for the council clung to the belief that the United States would never leave Afghanistan. There was simply too much at stake: counterterrorism, regional power, precious minerals. “They’re not so stupid to have spent that money here and then leave,” was how Sibghat characterized the prevailing view.

Bek and other officials also told me that there was a persistent belief within the government that the United States would remain, particularly after Biden defeated Trump. In fairness, there was hope within the U.S. establishment too; in February, a bipartisan group set up by Congress recommended making the withdrawal conditional on peace between Afghan parties — a move that the Taliban said they would react to by resuming attacks on U.S. forces.

Biden and his staff felt that they had been put in an untenable position by his predecessor; there were only 2,500 troops left in Afghanistan, so staying and fighting would have required a new surge. In April, Biden announced that [U.S. troops would be out by Sept. 11](#). “We will not conduct a hasty rush to the exit,” the president said. “We’ll do it responsibly, deliberately and safely.” Mohib, who answered written queries, told me he knew the Americans would leave: “We were planning for their departure.” He said that what they consistently asked for was a “gradual and responsible withdrawal” that would allow Afghan forces to adjust. “We never got that.”

**On July 15**, I went to the palace to see Mohib. Above the gate tower, a giant tricolor of the republic fluttered against a clear blue sky. After passing through security, I walked across the long, deserted lawn toward the building that held the Office of the National Security Council. I waited in the council’s empty reception room until one of Mohib’s staff members, a young woman who had studied in America, brought me upstairs to his office, where he sat behind his desk. Our conversation was mostly off the record. He seemed exhausted as we spoke about the desperate fighting in Kandahar City, which had been surrounded by the Taliban.

Only a few days before, there had been a farewell ceremony for Gen. Austin S. Miller, the long-serving U.S. commander. The military had completed 90 percent of its withdrawal, well ahead of Biden’s



deadline. This rapid pace was intended to reduce the risk of attack during the retreat, but it had a devastating impact on Afghan security forces. The U.S. military had spent billions to train and equip a force in its own image, heavily dependent on foreign contractors and air support. But the Afghan Army's notoriously corrupt generals stole their men's ammunition, food and wages; while security forces were supposed to total 300,000, the real number was likely less than a third of that. Out in the districts, the army and the police were crumbling, handing over their arms to the Taliban, who now controlled a quarter of the country.

Ghani had repeatedly insisted that he would stand and fight. "This is my home and my grave," he thundered in a speech earlier in the spring. His vice president, Amrullah Saleh, and the security council were working on a post-American strategy called *Kaf*, a Dari word meaning "base" or "floor," which envisioned garrison cities connected by corridors held by the army and bolstered by militias, similar to how President Mohammad Najibullah clung to power for three years after the Soviet withdrawal. "It was very much the Russian model," said Bek, who returned to the government as the president's chief of staff that month. "They had a good plan on paper, but for this to work, you needed to be a military genius."

Earlier in July, Ghani was warned that only two out of seven army corps were still functional, according to a senior Afghan official. Desperate for forces to protect Kandahar City, the president pleaded with the C.I.A. to use the paramilitary army formerly known as counterterrorism pursuit teams, according to Afghan officials. Trained for night raids and clandestine missions in the borderlands, the units had grown into capable light infantry, thousands strong. They were now officially part of the Afghan intelligence service and were known as Zero Units, after codes that corresponded to provinces: 01 was Kabul, 03 was Kandahar and so forth. But according to the officials, the C.I.A. still paid the salaries of these strike forces and had to consent to Ghani's request for them to defend Kandahar City that month. (A U.S. official stated that the units were under Afghan control; the C.I.A. declined to comment on details of their deployment.)

"They're very effective units, motivated, cheap," Mohib told me in his office, saying Kandahar would have fallen without them. "They don't need all sorts of heavy equipment. I wish we had more like them." But the Zero Units had a reputation for ruthlessness in battle; both journalists and Human Rights Watch have [referred to them as "death squads"](#) — allegations that the C.I.A. denied, saying they were the result of Taliban propaganda. I had been trying to track these shadowy units for years and was surprised to see them, in their distinctive tiger stripes, given glowing coverage on the government's social media accounts.

In Kabul, I met with Mohammad, an officer from one of the N.D.S. units that operated around the capital, whom I had known for a few years. Mohammad had worked as an interpreter for the unit's American advisers and as an instructor for undercover teams that carried out arrests inside the cities. He said morale had plummeted among his men, now that the Americans were leaving. According to Afghan officials, the station on Ariana Square was empty by late July. But Mohammad's team still received advice from the Americans. He showed me messages that he said were from the C.I.A., urging his unit to patrol areas around Kabul that had been infiltrated by the insurgents. "The airport is still in danger," one message said.

**The bubble world** did not survive on psychological repression alone. At the end of June, I had visited an Afghan journalist named Shershah Nawabi at the office of his small news agency, Pasbanan. A group of young men and women sat at computers in the sparsely furnished office, guzzling energy drinks.

"Here, take this, I can't publish it," Nawabi said, handing me the draft of an article titled, in Persian, "Latest Report: 98% of Government Officials' Families Live Outside Afghanistan."

The story listed the countries where the families of the Ghani administration were living, from the president — whose children grew up in the United States — on down. Out of 27 cabinet ministers, it claimed, only two had families who resided in Afghanistan full time. "In the event of a crisis in the country," Shershah had written, "all government officials will consider fleeing."

He had been leaked the information by sources inside the government. "I made a mistake," he said. "I called them to try to verify the info." The N.D.S. got wind, and one of his contacts at the intelligence service warned him not to endanger himself and his staff by publishing it.



It was clear that the consequences could be severe. There was growing concern in the international community that the [Afghan republic was stepping up pressure on dissidents](#), especially after [Waheed Muzhdah, a prominent commentator, was mysteriously assassinated](#) at the end of 2019, an attack that many blamed on the government.

On July 11, Hedayatullah Pakteen, a young university professor who had been part of Muzhdah's circle, was arrested at his home by intelligence agents and held for seven nights. He said he was hung by his wrists and beaten repeatedly, in an attempt to get him to implicate several others who were accused of links with the Taliban. He was freed after a campaign from his friends in the media; he said he was forced to sign a document promising that he wouldn't give interviews anymore. His friend Abdul Ghafar Kamyab, a defense lawyer known for taking the cases of people accused of being Taliban, was snatched from the center of Kabul and was missing for more than 40 days; he told me he was tortured severely, including with electric shocks.

According to Sibghat, the adviser to the office of the National Security Council, during the previous year he had participated in discussions about a group of lawyers and professors, former friends of Muzhdah, who called themselves peace activists. Sibghat told me that some officials had argued that they were Taliban sympathizers who should be arrested and "squeezed," which Sibghat understood as a euphemism for torture, until they agreed to stop speaking to the news media. Sibghat said he argued against it, pointing out that the Communists had used such methods and failed; Mohib, as was his habit, remained aloof without saying anything definite.

Torture had long been common in the republic's prisons, as documented since 2011 by the United Nations. [The U.N.'s biannual reports cataloged a list of methods](#) that included waterboarding and sexual assault, much of it carried out by the N.D.S., which was advised by the C.I.A. and British intelligence (both agencies have denied any involvement with torture). That July, according to Afghan officials, the British had gone to the government to protest the existence of an N.D.S. "hit list"; the Afghans fired two senior intelligence officials as a result. (The British government declined to comment.)

But as much as Kabul's journalists feared violence at the hands of the government, some worried that if the republic fell, worse would follow. At the end of July, I visited Zaki, the publisher I met at the rooftop party, to see how he was faring. We sat upstairs in the office of Etilaat-e Roz, cups of green tea and a packet of thin Esse cigarettes between us. "So what do you think is going to happen?" he asked with a smile.

Zaki was slight, with delicate features; he and most of his staff were Hazara, a historically oppressed Shia minority. He hadn't studied or lived abroad; he came from his village to Kabul for college and had founded his newspaper with a loan from friends. Over the last 10 years, Etilaat-e Roz had slowly grown, scraping by with ad sales and subscriptions, resisting emoluments from powerful sponsors. It finally attracted foreign grants from places like the Open Society Foundations and had become known for its bold exposés of corruption in the government.

But with the system disintegrating, Zaki said that he had been thinking about the role of the gadfly differently. Criticism, like objectivity, made sense only within a shared set of values. "If we're talking political philosophy, and the question of a republic versus an emirate, well, that's different," he told me. "We're liberals. We believe in freedom and democracy."

The entire order had been dependent on foreign money, which created space for progressives like Zaki. But opposition to liberalism, or what was labeled "Westernization," was not confined to the Taliban. A broad streak of political Islamism cut across Afghan society; even among Hazaras, there were reactionary clerics who would have been happy to lash Zaki and the other men and women who hung out in the cafes near the office. Even under a power-sharing agreement, Zaki feared that freedom of the press and women's rights would be the first areas of compromise. But Etilaat-e Roz was his young life's work, his fourth child. Of course it was his other three children who made the choice to stay so difficult.

“Some of us have no choice but to keep doing this, because of what we believe,” Zaki told me, with his rueful smile. He was going to remain as long as it was possible to do his work, as long as some foothold remained in the capital, however narrow, above the abyss that was opening. “We’re working as if Kabul won’t fall,” he said. “If Kabul falls, Etilaat-e Roz will fall, too.”

**The republic’s accelerating** collapse, which had begun in the rural areas, soon reached the towns and district centers, and finally the cities. On Aug. 6, Zaranj, the capital of Nimruz, became the first provincial center to fall to the Taliban. Nader Nadery, a member of the republic’s negotiating team from Nimruz, was called for a meeting with the president; he told Ghani that several of his relatives had been killed there. “I said that things are falling apart, the chain of command is broken and people are not telling the truth to you,” Nadery told me. “He answered, ‘Yes, it will take another six months for us to turn it around.’” Stunned, Nadery left the palace wondering what kind of information the president was getting. The day after Nimruz, a second capital, Sheberghan, fell. The next day, three capitals fell in the north: Sar-i-Pul, Takhar and [Kunduz](#).

That evening, I went to see Rangina. Zara’s goat, Vinegar, which cried incessantly when left alone, had been taken into the guard shed for the night. I sat with Rangina and Abdullah, discussing the rumors of martial law circulating in the capital. Behind Rangina, I could see the reflection of the television in the window as the evening news played images of burning buildings, refugees, soldiers promising to die for their country. There were increasingly strident assertions about what a Taliban takeover would mean: stories about [the forced marriage of young girls and widows to their fighters](#), even sex slavery. It would mean a return to the brutal days when men without beards were flogged in the streets, when women were not allowed to leave the home without a guardian, of public executions in soccer stadiums, of stoning and amputations, a massacre for everyone who had worked for the foreigners, a genocide for Afghanistan’s Hazara minority.

In the past, these kinds of statements had always been followed by a “therefore”: Therefore, America must not leave Afghanistan. Therefore, the war should continue. Now they were bleak predictions.

Rangina was frightened; the defense minister’s home was blown up just a few days earlier. But she was also skeptical about some of the claims of Taliban savagery; she told me about how the staff at a local education ministry in a recently captured province had posed for a photo with their new Taliban boss, seemingly unharmed.

I had been planning to travel to the south for research, and I thought I might stay at the office of Rangina’s cooperative, Kandahar Treasure. “Are you sure you want to go now?” she asked.

I didn’t understand how quickly things were falling apart; maybe I was in denial, too. I went to Hamid Karzai International Airport three days later, on the morning of Aug. 11. It was busier than I had ever seen it, a crush of passengers headed for the international terminal. The domestic side was quiet and tense. There were flights to the main cities of Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif, where, like Kandahar, battles were raging as the Taliban laid siege.

I went through security and sat in the boarding lounge, but I couldn’t get in touch with the fixer who was supposed to pick me up in Kandahar. I couldn’t get in touch with anyone there, in fact. Finally, a journalist friend called using the internet at the military base at the airport there. The Taliban had shut down the mobile networks in preparation for an all-out assault.

I got up and walked back out through security. The airline staff chased me down.

“I’m leaving,” I said. “My trip has been canceled.”

“Why?” They stared at me suspiciously.

“Because the phone networks are down. My office won’t let me go.”

I waited as they took a picture of my boarding pass and passport.

“He’s the third person to cancel like this,” one woman whispered anxiously.

When I got my documents back, I walked out against the flow of Afghans leaving their country. In the parking lot, there were groups of families, some crying and some silent, people in their Western outfits for travel, suits and T-shirts, girls with big up-dos and painted faces, matrons taking photos, men in turbans and karakul hats and prayer caps, the families embracing and then dividing, one part walking away, the others left watching.

The next day, [Kandahar City fell](#).

## **Part 2**

### **The Fall**

For months, American leaders had been reassuring the Afghans that the military withdrawal did not mean the end of U.S. engagement. Even after the last troops left on Aug. 31, a 650-strong security force was supposed to remain behind to protect the massive embassy complex. And with the U.S. Embassy remaining, other Western organizations were more likely to stay, too, and supplies and financial aid would continue to flow to the republic.

But now the rebels were advancing as fast as their motorcycles could carry them. On Thursday, Aug. 12, the city of Herat fell, and the Taliban captured Ghazni, 70 miles southwest of the capital. The Taliban had promised not to harm embassies and international groups, but the specter of the terrorist attack in Benghazi that killed U.S. diplomats in 2012 hung over the Biden administration. If even a single American was harmed, how could the Democrats defend having trusted the Taliban?

On Thursday, [Biden ordered the embassy to shut down](#), and diplomats began destroying classified materials and shifting operations to the airport, where 3,000 U.S. soldiers and Marines were being flown in to evacuate American citizens and their allies.

The Taliban would soon be at the gates. Could Kabul be defended? In theory, the capital boasted an impressive force: tens of thousands of soldiers and police officers, among them the country’s most elite units. But even if Kabul could be held, Ghani seemed to have finally accepted that the war was lost and had opened secret talks with the Taliban. According to Afghan officials and U.S. diplomats, his envoy in Doha, Abdul Salam Rahimi, had been developing a back channel to the movement’s leadership — not only to Baradar, the chief negotiator, but to the two powerful military deputies, Sirajuddin Haqqani and Mawlawi Yaqoub, son of the deceased leader Mullah Omar. The Taliban said they did not want to fight a bloody battle for Kabul, one that could mean the destruction of its banks and embassies and nongovernmental organizations, of its institutions, of the entire system.

On Thursday, the same day that Biden ordered the embassy to close, Rahimi, who had recently come back from Qatar, met with Ghani and Mohib and explained the proposal he had worked out with the Taliban, according to the officials. It was, in essence, a negotiated surrender; the Taliban would agree to a two-week cease-fire so that a delegation from Kabul could travel to Doha and work out the details of a transitional government. The Taliban would be in charge, but their rule would be “inclusive,” which meant some republic officials might take part. Ghani would call a *loya jirga*, a gathering of notables, who would approve the deal. Then Ghani would resign and hand over power to the *jirga*, who would ask the Taliban to form a government.

Immediately after the meeting, Khalilzad’s team in Doha, which had been in the loop about the back channel, received two calls. The first was from Rahimi, explaining that Ghani had agreed to the deal and was prepared to step down. (Rahimi did not respond to a request for comment.) The second was from Mohib. According to a U.S. diplomat involved in the negotiations, Mohib described the meeting in more conditional terms: Ghani would agree, but only if he was certain that his terms were being met. (Mohib denied this, claiming that he made “no reference” to Rahimi’s discussions.)

That night, seeking clarity on Ghani's intentions, Antony Blinken, the U.S. secretary of state, spoke with him by video conference. According to the U.S. diplomat, Ghani said he would agree to the deal, to Blinken's relief. He was prepared to resign.

"It was closer to Rahimi's version than Mohib's," the diplomat said. Now the Afghans needed to carry out the peaceful transfer of power; they had, in theory, two weeks until the Americans left the airport, during which time the Taliban were supposed to remain outside the city.

The fate of the capital's millions of inhabitants hung in the balance.

**On Friday, Aug. 13,** Kabul's residents awoke to news of the American evacuation. It was the Islamic day of rest. Though the Taliban were advancing, they still hadn't reached the nearest cities, and Kabul's streets were quiet as I drove to visit Rangina. She had invited me for lunch, and I found her in the hall by the kitchen, her sleeves rolled up, scraping out pumpkins alongside the cook. She cleaned up and joined her husband and me; she said she had just turned down a request from the National Security Council to turn the schools into shelters for refugees. "They just reopened the schools, and now you want me to close them?" she said. "If you want to do that, then declare martial law and do it."

People from neighboring districts were pouring into the capital, fleeing ahead of the Taliban, who the U.S. Embassy had warned were committing war crimes. Given Afghanistan's bloody history, they had reason to be fearful. In 1992, after the Communist government collapsed, the mujahedeen tore the capital apart fighting one another. Four years later, the Taliban hung the former president, Najibullah, and brandished whips against those who played music or shaved their beards. And in 2001, the United States and its warlord allies had hunted down the vanquished Taliban around the country; some were shipped off to detention centers and tortured. Now many were certain that despite their promise of amnesty, the Taliban would take revenge.

Rangina was getting calls from friends and relatives in the United States, telling her to flee before it was too late. "How many of us are you going to save?" she asked. "Thirty-five million? And then live with shame for the rest of my life? Because I had the American passport in my pocket, and I could just leave." Her phone rang, and she answered on speaker. It was an employee from her cooperative in Kandahar City, who said that one of his relatives, a former police officer, had been pulled from his home by Taliban fighters and shot.

"Allah!" Rangina exclaimed.

"Be careful, be careful," Abdullah told him.

"We don't know what the hell is going to happen," Rangina said, after they hung up. We looked out the window, to where Zara was playing on the lawn with four other girls. Only one had an American passport. Rangina's mother, who is in the United States, had begged her to send Zara there, if she and Abdullah were too stubborn to leave. Rangina was considering it.

"This guy doesn't agree with me," she said, turning to her husband. "Unless he's changed his mind, I don't know. Have you? You want her here? And if these wild animals come and, God forbid. ..."

We looked at Abdullah, who was silent for a moment, as if some memory was stirring in him. He was older than Rangina. He had fought the Russians, lived through three regime changes, seen bodies in the streets and homes gutted by looting. And he knew how vicious the Taliban had been with their opponents in the 1990s. He was ready to give his life to protect his wife and daughter; he also knew that might not be enough. But he didn't want Rangina and Zara to be separated. "Then you leave, too," he said.

"I'm not leaving," Rangina replied.

**That night, I went** to a farewell party in the Green Zone, on the same blocked-off street as the Canadian and British Embassies. Many of the foreign nationals based in Kabul left the country during the pandemic

to work remotely, but the few who remained had been as surprised as everyone by the sudden collapse of the government. As we gathered on the front lawn of an NGO guesthouse, gorging on hoarded wines and whiskey, some were in tears, while others danced manically.

The decision of the U.S. Embassy to pull out meant that most other Western organizations were evacuating, too, although the embassies of Iran, Russia and China — America's rivals — were going to remain. As a rumor spread at the party that the U.S. military would shut down commercial flights at the airport in a few days, people got on their phones and tried to rebook; most tickets were sold out.

Afterward, a friend persuaded me to go with him to another party at a senior Afghan official's house, someone close to Ghani. I'd been there a couple times. It was a blast-walled compound with AstroTurf in the yard, mirrors on the walls, exotic pets and a bountiful liquor cabinet. Once we got past the guards, we found just a few people sitting around, glued to their phones. I sat next to the official, who liked to D.J. at parties.

"Three thousand troops are coming, you think that will change anything?" he said. He showed me a message on his phone. "This is info from the TB side. They'll take 17 provinces, in a power-sharing deal with the government."

That was roughly half of the country. "I don't think they'd settle for less than total control now," I said. He shook his head angrily. "No, they'll realize if they take it all, the Americans might come with a hundred thousand troops," he said. He tapped his head. "They're rational. They have advisers from Pakistan, from China, from Russia. You think these guys with the long beards are making decisions?" Ghani had banned senior officials from leaving the country, but the day after the party, my host made it out through the airport, accompanied by a relative of the president.

**On Saturday, Aug. 14**, the start of the workweek, the streets of downtown Kabul were in a frenzy, crowded with people running desperate errands. Some were trying to obtain passports or plane tickets, while others stood in long lines outside the banks. There was a shortage of cash. The value of the afghani had dropped suddenly; people wanted dollars.

Early that morning, I went for a jog in the park by my house and found it crowded with displaced families in tents, the air thick with cooking smoke and the stench of the outdoor toilets. Taxis and vans loaded with mattresses and a few household goods rolled up, and people piled out, seeking what free space was available.

I was busy that day with my own errands, like finding a satellite phone, even though for months I'd been making contingency plans with my housemate, Jim Huylebroek, a Belgian photographer. We'd talked through various scenarios for the fall of the capital, at first with the idle enthusiasm of preppers, and then with growing earnestness. Would there be a breakdown in communications? Martial law, house-to-house fighting, abductions? Riots and looting?

The New York Times, like most Western media organizations, was preparing to evacuate its staff. But Jim and I were both freelancers, so we could choose to stay. I had been watching what happened when the Taliban captured the cities of Herat and Kandahar. There was some violence, but there were no massacres, no executions of captured officials; the movement seemed to have control over its fighters. Now that they would govern, it was in the Emirate's own interest, I thought, to stick to its promises, especially when it came to foreigners.

What I feared most was a chaotic interregnum before the Taliban could establish control, in a city filled with armed men. We might have to hole up in our house, which had solar power and was well fortified with bars on the windows; Jim and I stockpiled everything from canned goods to buckshot.

**That afternoon, Ghani** called a meeting at the palace, a gathering of the country's most powerful men. The former president, Hamid Karzai, sat in a semicircle with leaders of the mujahedeen, former Communists, contracting barons — men who were handed power by the Americans in 2001, when their enemies, the Taliban, seemed utterly defeated. They had presided over two decades of plenty, when a rain

of billions from abroad had enriched a minority, even as poverty among the people had grown. Now they faced the ruin of the republic.

Mohib was there, but the bellicose vice president, Saleh, wasn't — the daily Kabul security meeting he normally led had been canceled that morning because of his absence, one participant said, though no one made much of it at the time. Ghani asked the others what they had to say. Karzai spoke of his fears for families like his own, who, he pointedly noted, were still in Kabul. The time had come for painful sacrifices, Karzai said, but he did not explicitly call on Ghani to resign. His point seemed clear enough, and it was echoed by the others, who pleaded with the president to avoid bloodshed and destruction in the capital.

If Ghani had in fact agreed to a deal with the Taliban through Rahimi's back channel, then the meeting was mostly political theater. But Ghani didn't explain the details, whether out of caution or pride, or because he still hadn't decided if he would go through with it. He simply told the others that a delegation should go to Qatar immediately; he would accept whatever agreement they made with the Taliban.

The president left the meeting, and afterward, a group stood outside in consternation. Some, unaware of the secret talks, wondered if the president understood he had to resign. There was confusion over who would go to Doha. Mohammad Akram Khpalwak, an adviser to the president, was sent to ask Ghani, who answered that he would decide after he talked with the Americans.

That evening, Ghani met with the commander of U.S. forces and the acting ambassador to discuss the security plan for Kabul. The Americans promised to provide air support and surveillance. Then Ghani spoke by videoconference with Blinken. Again, according to the U.S. diplomat, they discussed the back channel for an orderly transfer of power to the Taliban.

**By that night**, Mazar-i-Sharif in northern Afghanistan had fallen, and the Taliban continued their rapid advance on the capital. The republic's forces, utterly demoralized, were simply laying down their arms, allowing the rebels, after their long, lean years in the mountains, to take possession of billions of dollars worth of vehicles and weapons bought by the United States and its allies. The competition between commanders for booty and the prestige of being the first to conquer territory added momentum to the Taliban's advance — as did rivalries within the movement. The Taliban leadership was largely from the south, especially Kandahar, but most of the insurgency around Kabul had fallen under the command of the Haqqanis, a family-led network of fighters from eastern Afghanistan that was close to the Pakistani military. Several months earlier, a senior figure, Khalil Haqqani, began making contact with Afghan officials, his former aide told me, paving the way for a push on Kabul from the east. The Taliban's own psychological warfare was paying off: By now, cities were falling without a fight, surrendering after a mere phone call.

In the early hours of Sunday morning, the provincial governor of Nangarhar, the gateway to Kabul to the east, received his counterpart from the Emirate. Taliban fighters entered the city without firing a shot. As the sun rose, Haqqani sent a voice message congratulating the governor for handing over power peacefully: "You will have a place in history, for protecting the people's lives and property."

Taliban forces from Kandahar, meanwhile, hurriedly advanced north, toward Wardak Province, whose capital, only 10 miles from Kabul, fell around 10 o'clock on Sunday morning.

The road was now open to Kabul, where the police and the army were starting to desert their posts. Saleh, the vice president who had run security meetings for the capital, had secretly escaped to his home province of Panjshir, which helped throw the chain of command in Kabul into disarray. Local criminal gangs — many of them connected to the police — were waiting for their chance to start looting. At 9 that morning, when the police abandoned the station in District 7, near the king's old palace, local gangsters, some dressed as Taliban in turbans, began to loot the station of weapons and other valuables, according to residents; they were joined by passers-by, who carried off computers and furniture.

By noon on Sunday, Aug. 15, Taliban fighters had reached the gates of the capital. The rebels gathered at the eastern and southern outskirts of the city on motorcycles and captured pickups, dusty and tired from the road, and waited.

**Shortly before 10 o'clock** that morning, the president sat in the shade of a courtyard at the palace, reading a book. He had met with Rahimi, who updated him on the back channel talks with the Taliban; that same morning, Khalilzad was meeting with Baradar in Doha to discuss the proposal for a peaceful transfer of power. Then Ghani met alone with Mohib, followed by a larger group including Bek, who said he suggested that the president call an emergency cabinet meeting in order to rally his officials. It was then that many learned that Saleh had escaped; the meeting never happened.

At 10 a.m., Khpalwak, the adviser, arrived in the courtyard, in order to find out who was supposed to travel to Doha to negotiate the handover. Karzai was sitting in his house next door, ready to leave that evening or the next morning on an Afghan charter flight. Khpalwak told me that Ghani said that Mohib should go to Doha, as well.

Jawed Kootwal, Khpalwak's chief of staff, had snapped a photo of the president from his office window — Ghani's frequent reading breaks had become a joke between him and his friends. Now Kootwal watched as his boss left and Mohib arrived with a man wearing a white robe and an Arab headdress. Kootwal took another photo, which he would later publish online. The man, a United Arab Emirates official, was named Saif, an acquaintance of Mohib's who was well connected with Afghan power brokers. The meeting had not been listed on the president's schedule that day.

**It was nearly 11 a.m.** when I stepped out of my house, and the traffic jam in the city had grown even worse. The cars in the street were at a standstill. Jim and I had no idea what would happen next. We were too busy to dwell on it; the sight of an entire world dissolving produced a certain numbness. There was the relentless sound of helicopters, while around us life continued as it had to — the shops and markets were open.

I had planned to meet two former translators from the U.S. military, who were desperately hoping to be evacuated with the departing forces. They got stuck in traffic and finally ended up walking the last mile; when they arrived, we decided to sit in the yard of a nearby restaurant, and have an early lunch.

Over a pan of chicken karahi, the translators, Mahdi and Nadim, told me about the time they'd spent with the U.S. Special Forces. Each had extensive combat experience, and several Green Berets had written them recommendation letters, but they'd still been waiting for years to go to America under the Special Immigrant Visa program for local employees. There was a backlog of some 20,000 applications. According to a U.S. official, Ghani had resisted a mass airlift, arguing that it would spark panic, and charter flights didn't start until the end of July. In recent months, as the Taliban advanced on Kabul, their wait had turned to agony. Mahdi had reached the final stage and submitted his passport; in July, he was called to the embassy, where it was handed back to him, stamped "Canceled without prejudice" — most likely a paperwork snafu, he was told, but it would eventually be resolved.

"We don't have any more time," Nadim said, his voice rising. The two translators were certain the Taliban would behead them if they caught them. "If you don't hear from us, it means we're dead — so tell our story."

It was almost noon; my phone had been on silent the whole time. I looked up and saw my driver walking toward us, a look of shock on his face.

"People are saying the Taliban have entered Kabul," he told us. "They're inside the city."

**Around 11 a.m.,** officials at the palace heard gunfire. Panic seized the N.S.C. building as rumors spread that the Taliban were attacking the palace. From his window, Najib Motahari, Bek's chief of staff, could see some of Mohib's staff running across the lawn, fleeing toward the gate — *Tommies*, he thought contemptuously.



On social media, there was talk that the Taliban had arrived at the outskirts of the city. Were the Taliban breaking the agreement for a cease-fire? At the N.S.C. building, Bek met with Rahimi, the president's envoy, and began making phone calls, trying to find out what was happening. They spoke with Baradar's team in Qatar, who insisted that their forces had not entered the city.

The Taliban were as surprised as everyone else by their lightning success; they weren't prepared to take control of the capital and feared a confrontation with the Americans at the airport. To confirm the cease-fire agreement they had made with Rahimi, the Taliban spokesman now posted a statement online: "Because Kabul is a big city with a large population, the mujahedeen of the Islamic Emirate do not intend to enter by force, and negotiations are underway with the other side for a peaceful transfer of power."

To the American team in Doha, the statement was validation that the back channel was in contact with the Taliban's military leadership, who could deliver a cease-fire on the ground. "To have them release a long statement like that about their fighters does not occur without Yaqoub and Siraj's blessing," the U.S. diplomat told me. According to several Taliban commanders I later spoke to, they had received orders not to enter the capital. And local residents said that the Taliban massed at the city's gates were in fact holding back at that point.

Bek, reassured, posted a message on Twitter at noon: "Don't panic! Kabul is safe!"

But while Khalilzad's team might have been optimistic about the cease-fire holding, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul had decided to get the last of its staff out immediately and haul down the flag. Twenty minutes after Bek's post, the embassy sent out an alert that prompted many of Kabul's foreigners to make a sudden dash to the airport. A security adviser at the embassy posted a WhatsApp message to a group of expats, giving a deadline of 5:30 that evening for helicopter evacuations from the Green Zone: "Urgent Update — the US Embassy advises that all foreign missions move to HKIA immediately."

**Hearing the driver's** news, I quickly paid for our meal and said farewell to the two interpreters. I told my driver to go home to his family and set out on foot. People were wild with fear, having heard that the Taliban were in the city. Some shouted into phones; others dashed heedlessly through traffic. The sound of helicopters and jets was loud in the sky. A motorcade of Land Cruisers, sirens blaring, forced its way through the intersection.

It was noon when I got home, and I found my housemate, Jim, with his camera in hand, already wearing a traditional robe. I donned mine; we both spoke Dari and could usually pass for locals. He wanted to take a walk and see what was happening in our neighborhood; it wasn't clear to us, from the rumors and official denials on Twitter, whether the Taliban had actually entered Kabul.

The last shopkeepers were locking their gates as we walked down Chicken Street. Workers were rushing out of their offices and heading home. Now and again, we could hear scattered gunshots. There was a police headquarters and ministry nearby; some guards were still in uniform, but others stood wearing robes, ready to run. Some checkpoints were deserted.

A police commander lived on our street, and when we got back, we found his guards milling outside his house, most of them in plainclothes already. I had a sudden sense of the fragility of the social contract that bound us; our shared reality was melting into air. I was as worried about being robbed or shot by them as I was about the Taliban.

"Our leaders sold us out," one of the police officers said. "If the Taliban come here, what can we do?" We looked up. An American gunship was circling over the city, firing off shimmering flares.

**After the panic** that morning at the palace, Bek went to see Ghani and explained that the Taliban in Doha had announced that they would not enter the city. The president agreed to record a message to reassure the population of Kabul. It was filmed around 1:30, with Ghani sitting at a desk in his office that once belonged to King Amanullah, who fled the country a century earlier in the face of an Islamist uprising.

Afterward, Bek and Rahimi went for lunch together. The presidential guards had locked down the palace and sent most of the staff away; the place was quiet. To Bek, the situation seemed under control.

But Mohib was getting ready to escape. He had never trusted the Taliban and believed that they had already started to enter the city. Mohib later wrote to me that Khalil Haqqani called him and asked him to surrender. "I explored their desire for negotiations, but it was clear they were set on a military victory," he wrote. "They had not negotiated in good faith thus far, and they certainly were not in a position to have to do that on August 15." Haqqani's former aide disputed this, saying that Mohib asked to set up a meeting between their representatives and that Haqqani agreed and promised he wouldn't be harmed.

Motahari, Bek's aide, told me he saw Mohib's senior staff running around the N.S.C. offices carrying bags and overhead them talking about the council's operational cash. (Mohib and his staff denied taking bags of money out of the country.)

The president's personal helicopters, on standby at the airport, were summoned to the palace. Three Mi-17s landed. Unusually, they were fully fueled, which meant they couldn't carry as many passengers.

According to several people present, a group that included Mohib and Rula Ghani boarded first; then Mohib went back with the head of the palace guard and returned with the president. Several of the president's supporters later told me that Ghani had been reluctant to leave and had to be persuaded that his life was in danger.

As the president boarded, there was a fight between the remaining guards and staff over who would fit on board the last helicopter; Mohib's secretary was thrown to the tarmac.

The helicopters took off and headed north. They were not returning to the airport, where, according to one official present, the U.A.E. was going to send a plane to evacuate them. Instead — whether it was because they feared the growing chaos at the airport or didn't want to face the Americans — the president and his crew flew low through the mountains, trying to avoid detection by the U.S. military, which still controlled Afghanistan's airspace.

By then it was around a quarter to 3. Bek was walking through the palace; he told me he didn't realize the president had flown away in a helicopter. The sky was full of them that day. It wasn't until he ran into an agitated Hanif Atmar, the foreign minister, who been holding onto the president's passport, that Bek learned what had happened, he said.

"Do you know where the president is?" asked Atmar, who had arrived just as the choppers were taking off. "The president went home," Bek answered.

"No. He ran away."

"I don't believe it. I just saw him."

"Look," Atmar said, pulling out the passport with the seal of the republic on the cover. "He's gone."

**When Jim and I** got back from our walk, shortly before 2 p.m., I saw I had a message from Rangina: "Hi. Are you OK? What's going on?"

I called her and we spoke briefly; she was at home, having left the education ministry around noon, accompanied by her staff. She didn't know any more than I did about what was going on at the palace with Ghani. "I have no way of connecting with him, so I have no idea where he is," Rangina said over the phone, sounding surprisingly calm. The Taliban's announcement that they wouldn't enter the capital by force had eased her mind; she had also heard a rumor that the Americans would take over security.

We said farewell. Jim and I decided to get on our bicycles and go for a ride around the city. As we came outside, we saw the police on our street fleeing in civilian vehicles, as the neighbors gaped.

The streets were almost empty of cars now, the shops shuttered. As we arrived at the traffic circle outside the U.S. Embassy, two Chinooks took off and roared overhead. We stopped and stared at the departing helicopters. “Remember, this is not Saigon,” the secretary of state would say on television later that day.

Jim got off his bike and started snapping photos. It was hot and my mouth was dry, so I bought some water from a juice cart. We could see plumes of smoke rising from inside the Green Zone. A convoy of armored S.U.V.s screeched through the roundabout, headed for the airport. Groups of ragged-looking men walked past, some carrying small bundles tied in scarves. “They’re prisoners,” the juice seller told us. “A big group of them came by earlier.” Earlier that day, the guards at the main prison in the city had fled, and the prisoners had broken loose — the same thing happened at the detention center in Bagram, north of the capital.

The Taliban were still nowhere to be seen downtown. We headed home, passing the palace gates, where there were still some guards outside. Jim and I had looped the whole Green Zone: the ugly concrete maws of its compounds stood open, the barriers upraised. Across the city, soldiers and police officers took off their uniforms, laid down their weapons and walked off into the evening light.

**At Karzai’s house,** a group of his advisers listened in dismay as the palace guards arrived and announced that Ghani and his entourage had fled. Karzai had planned to help negotiate the transfer of power; now the guards asked him to take charge of the palace. Abdul Karim Khurram, his former minister of information, was present and told me that Karzai declined, saying he had no legal basis to do so. They tried calling senior officials, including the minister of defense, but those they spoke to were in hiding or had already escaped to the airport. But Karzai chose to stay. He recorded a video, which they posted on Facebook that afternoon. In it, he stands with his three young daughters in front of him; the girls seem blissfully unaware, giggling as the littlest one tries to squirm away. “Citizens of Kabul, my family and I are here with you,” Karzai said, straining to raise his voice over the roar of jets and helicopters. “I call on the security forces and the Taliban to ensure the security of the lives and property of the people.”

Khurram said they were worried about what would happen once word of Ghani’s escape became public. Already, the situation in the city was deteriorating rapidly. According to a police officer who was monitoring the radio network that day, by lunchtime many of Kabul’s police stations had been abandoned, becoming targets of large, organized groups of looters. Around 4 p.m., the home of the deputy interior minister was visited by a convoy of armed men driving Rangers and Humvees they had taken from a nearby station. They were flying the Taliban flag, but the police officer who was present told me he recognized them — they were from a criminal gang from nearby Shakardara District. When he asked for a receipt for the vehicles and weapons they were seizing, they put a gun to his head.

**That afternoon,** as the situation grew increasingly chaotic in Kabul, Khalilzad convened a meeting in Doha with the Taliban leadership and Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of Central Command, who had flown in to explain the American plan for evacuation to his former enemies. They met in Khalilzad’s suite at the top of the Ritz Carlton; the two sides faced off across a table — on one, the craggy Marine four-star general, an Alabama native; on the other, Mullah Baradar, dressed in a long robe.

According to two people who were present, McKenzie gave a presentation about his mission to evacuate U.S. citizens and their allies. He spread two maps out on the table. One showed a narrow corridor between the U.S. Embassy and the airport, where his forces would be active. The second had a 30-kilometer radius drawn around the center of Kabul; any move by the Taliban into that zone, McKenzie warned them, would be interpreted as a hostile act. Baradar and the other Taliban leaned over the map, trying to find the names of the areas inside the 30-kilometer circle, which extended well past the gates of Kabul.

We already have some people inside there, Baradar answered.

McKenzie told him to withdraw their forces.

Baradar replied that the Taliban had no intention of interfering with the American evacuation. But the situation on the ground had changed. They all knew by now that Ghani had fled and that [the republic's forces were collapsing](#). Khalilzad and the Taliban had been getting messages from Afghan politicians in Kabul, begging for someone to take charge of security before the looting and violence got worse. Everyone feared what might happen come nightfall.

Who is going to take responsibility for Kabul — are you? Baradar asked.

Khalilzad and McKenzie looked at each other. My mission is what I described, the general said. Baradar persisted, saying he wanted to know who would ensure security for the people of Kabul. He pointed a finger at McKenzie: Are you, general?

It was hard to know if the Taliban were serious in asking the United States to take over security in Kabul; according to the Biden administration, it would have required a massive troop deployment and was never considered as an option.

McKenzie repeated that he had his mission, and that was it.

In that case, Baradar asked, what if the Taliban went in and took over security?

There was a pause as the two sides conferred among themselves. Finally, McKenzie indicated the second map, with its narrow corridor. As long as there was no interference with his mission, the general said, he had “no opinion” on that.

**It was nearly 5 p.m.** when Jim and I returned home on our bicycles. Our driver, Akbar, was waiting for us; the streets were clear, so we decided to drive to the western outskirts of the city, where the main Taliban advance would be arriving from Wardak Province.

Traffic was light until we hit the main arterial road that runs west, where a stream of cars was leaving the city. As Akbar crept up the on-ramp, we got down and walked to the start of the driveway of the Intercontinental Hotel. The cops here had changed into robes as well, but still had their weapons. We introduced ourselves as journalists.

“The war’s over!” one said. He laughed. “We’ve surrendered.”

“You surrendered?” I asked “To whom?”

They smiled and pointed to a bearded man sitting in their midst; he had a black scarf over his head and was wearing white high tops. He carried a Kalashnikov and a radio. A Talib, the first we’d seen that day. He returned our greetings gruffly. Jim asked to take a photo, and he assented. He was from Wardak, and spoke a little Dari.

“How long have you been a mujahed?” I said.

“Eighteen years,” he said.

I asked if he had anything to tell the public.

“Don’t worry. We have no problem with ordinary people. All that’s propaganda.”

“What about the foreigners at the airport?”

“The foreigners should go. We don’t have any need for them,” he said. He’d assumed I was Afghan. “If you and I can make peace, then what do we need them for?”

The police had the giddiness of condemned men granted a reprieve; they crowded shyly around the Talib, who seemed annoyed by his duty but not in the least concerned about being surrounded by armed men who would have shot him a day ago. The cops wanted to pose for a photo with him. After Jim snapped it, the Talib waved us away. “Our leaders said we’re not supposed to give interviews.”

By now the car had made it up the on-ramp, and we got back in and headed to the western edge of the city, a predominantly Pashtun neighborhood called Company. The area drew rural migrants, many of whom were sympathetic to the insurgents. As we approached, we could see crowds gathered by the side of the road, cheering. A youth with a scarf wrapped around his face stood in the intersection, waving a white banner with handwritten Arabic script: THERE IS NO GOD BUT GOD AND MUHAMMAD IS HIS PROPHET.

A tan Ford Ranger drove by, with armed Taliban fighters sitting inside. Several more police and army vehicles followed, including Humvees and four-and-half-ton trucks; the Taliban on board were holding American rifles, M-16s and M-4s. They were carrying booty out of the city, back to their lines on the outskirts. The crowd of men, mostly young, was whistling and cheering; packs of little children ran after the trucks, trying to jump aboard the rear bumper. Jim had his camera out; the Taliban were happy to be photographed.

More fighters roared by on motorcycles, armed and blaring autotuned *taranas*, Islamic chants, from their cellphones. At the main Company roundabout, there was an immense crowd cheering: “Long live the Taliban.”

**After flying for** more than an hour, the three presidential helicopters arrived at the Uzbekistan border and landed; confusion ensued at the Termez airport as they were surrounded by soldiers — the Uzbek government had apparently not been informed of their arrival. Eventually, the president, his wife, Mohib and several aides were taken to the governor’s guesthouse, but the rest of the 50 or so people on board spent a miserable night out in the open by the helicopters, relieving themselves on the tarmac. The next day, a charter flight arrived and took them all to Abu Dhabi.

The U.A.E., which had deep business ties with Kabul’s elite, was a close ally of Ghani’s; according to three sources within the administration, Abu Dhabi had secretly helped fund his election campaigns. (The U.A.E. did not respond to a request for comment.) What exactly was discussed at that meeting between the U.A.E. official, Ghani and Mohib that morning remains a matter of speculation. Mohib told me that “we discussed an evacuation plan for the future, but not for that day.”

For many Afghans, their president’s flight from the country was a stunning act of cowardice and betrayal that plunged the capital into chaos. Days later, Ghani, in a statement posted to Twitter, promised to explain his actions in detail in the future and said he had left to avoid provoking a civil war. “Leaving Kabul was the most difficult decision of my life,” he wrote, “but I believed it was the only way to keep the guns silent and save Kabul and her 6 million citizens.”

Mohib made a similar argument to me, writing that the Afghan security forces were “no longer a consolidated force within our control at that point. Keeping security of the city without mobilizing militias and aerial bombardment was not possible, and we were not prepared to do that.”

In retrospect, it’s clear that the breakdown of Kabul’s command and control, along with mass desertions by government forces, was already underway by the time Ghani fled. But it also seems obvious that the president was not in immediate danger. His guard force was intact, and the Taliban were still nowhere near the palace that afternoon.

“It was the safest place in Afghanistan,” said Bek, his chief of staff.

**Around 6:30,** the news of Ghani’s escape finally broke. Around the same time, the Taliban published a second statement: “The Islamic Emirate has ordered its forces to enter the areas of Kabul that have been

abandoned by the enemy, in order prevent thieves and looters from harming the people. ... Mujahedeen are not allowed to enter anyone's home, or harass anyone."

The sudden fall of the city had caught the Taliban leadership without adequate forces on hand. Their men had been busy with capturing the neighboring provinces that same day; coordination was difficult, as many commanders avoided the use of phones and radio during daylight hours, for fear of airstrikes by the Afghan air force. The first Taliban units were scrambled into Kabul in the late afternoon, and headed for key locations like the army and intelligence headquarters, where they were aided by sleeper cells and sympathizers that emerged from hiding. But it took until sunset to collect a force of several hundred men in Wardak, who did not make it into town until well after dark.

In all, according to one senior Taliban commander's estimate, the rebels took command of Kabul with well under a thousand men — less than the number of Marines at the airport, let alone the tens of thousands of Afghan security forces who had deserted their posts.

**That night, the** street in front of the palace gate was dark and empty as a Taliban convoy arrived, followed by an Al Jazeera Arabic crew they had summoned to witness their entry. Hamdullah Mokhles, the commander in charge, was a deputy to a senior leader from Helmand — in the end, it was the southern forces, and not the Haqqanis, who had the honor of entering the palace. Accompanying him was Salahuddin Ayubi, the military chief for the central zone, who had captured Wardak that morning, and a former Guantánamo detainee, Gholam Ruhani.

They waited for one of the palace guards to arrive, a general named Mohammadullah Andar. He unlocked the gate for them shortly after 10 p.m.; as they walked inside, Andar nervously told the journalists that he had been at the airport, hoping to escape, when one of Ghani's officials in Doha, Masoom Stanekzai, had called him and told him to hand over the palace to the Taliban, promising him he'd be safe.

They arrived at a locked gate, to which Andar didn't have a key. Hameedullah Shah, the Al Jazeera team's producer, told me he suggested they go a different route, through Ariana Square, past the evacuated embassy and C.I.A. station. Ruhani replied that was a "red zone," using the English term, and that the Americans might bomb them if they did. Instead, Mokhles, the leader, pulled out a pistol and shot open the lock.

Andar led the group deeper into the palace, into Ghani's office. There they found the desk where, that same afternoon, the Afghan president had recorded his message to reassure the people. On it was a book of poems from an Afghan singer. As the cameras rolled, Mokhles and Ayubi sat down at the desk while a fighter recited a Victory Surah from the Quran:

*Indeed, we have granted you a clear triumph, O Prophet.*

### **Part 3**

#### **The Evacuation**

In the days after the fall of Kabul, it sometimes felt as if we were living in two cities. In one, the streets were quiet, and people stayed home, afraid of the Taliban fighters with their turbans and long hair standing guard outside military compounds and shuttered embassies. In the other, the one the world was watching on TV, desperate crowds surged against the walls surrounding the airport as gunshots rang out.

I was receiving a constant stream of messages from Afghans asking for help escaping the country. Some were old friends; others, people I'd met once and interviewed. As a Westerner working in the developing world, I was used to my powerlessness in such matters. Usually, the most I could do was help people fill out the complex paperwork needed for programs like the Special Immigrant Visa. For years now, the West had been stepping up measures to keep Afghan asylum seekers out, making it almost impossible for them to get tourist visas, canceling study programs, paying countries like Turkey to build walls and even, in the case of Australia, detaining them on remote Pacific islands. Just 10 days earlier, six E.U. countries, including Germany, had [warned against halting deportations of Afghans](#), saying that it sent "the wrong signal." The evacuation — a collection of national efforts under the American military umbrella — was initially meant for countries' own citizens, green-card and visa holders, and a limited group of locals, mostly current and former employees.

That changed the night of Aug. 15, when thousands of desperate Afghans overran the civilian terminal and spilled out onto the tarmac. On Monday morning, a U.S. Air Force C-17 was filmed taking off through the crowd. Several people were crushed under the wheels, while others, clinging to the underside of the jet, fell to their deaths as it lifted off. As these images played to a global audience riveted by the drama at the airport, the West, in a paroxysm of regret, opened its arms to Afghan refugees. Already, [Canada had announced that it would take 20,000 people](#), a figure it would later double. Other countries followed suit, and the United States set up giant transit camps in Doha and other military bases overseas, to process Afghan evacuees for resettlement.

Although the West wanted to save Afghans from the Taliban, the evacuation could take place only with their tacit support. Their harried young fighters had taken over the southern, civilian side of the airport perimeter, where they used warning shots and whips to prevent the mob from overrunning the airfield, as they had on the first day. On the northern, military side, the line was held by Marines and the Zero Units.

With each day, even as people were shot and trampled at the gates, the crowds grew larger and more frenzied, some arriving from distant provinces. A few petitioners already had resettlement cases, like the interpreters I'd met the day of the fall, but many more came bearing some piece of paper they hoped would qualify them for evacuation — a certificate given to them years ago by the Marines in Helmand, a photograph from a conference for female activists or a U.N. observer's card from a past, disputed election.

There was a widespread belief that if you could only get inside the airport, you'd make it to Germany or Canada, and in fact, many had gotten out in the chaos of the first night, when, in order to clear the runway, people were bundled onto planes indiscriminately and flown to Doha.

For years, Afghans had been paying smugglers to cross deserts and mountains, risking their lives to reach Europe's hostile frontiers. The desperate scenes around the airport — families, half-dead from dehydration, being tear-gassed and beaten by men with guns — reminded me of what I witnessed when I traveled the smuggler's road five years earlier, during Europe's border crisis. Now the border was here in Kabul, manned by the Zero Units and the Taliban.

**For many Westerners** who had been involved with Afghanistan over the past 20 years and were watching this disaster from abroad, the only way to do something was to help the Afghans they knew to escape. They tried lobbying their home governments, but some turned to direct action. A group of my friends connected to Sayara, a research-and-communications company that contracted with the U.S. government, had gotten together to try to evacuate Sayara's local staff and others at risk. The list grew as they found donors who were willing to help get more people out — journalists, women's rights activists and even members of the girls' robotics team, whose faces had been painted on the wall outside the U.S. Embassy.

Soon they had raised more than a million dollars from places like the Rockefeller Foundation, enough to fly their own charter plane in. They got permission from the Ugandan government to bring people there while they waited for resettlement. Then they tried to get access to the airport; they started with the State Department and the military, but in the end it was another friend of theirs, a writer and former C.I.A. officer, who succeeded. He worked his contacts at the agency, whose paramilitary branch was playing a key role in the evacuation.

They needed someone on the ground in Kabul to get a convoy to the airport. They'd been in touch with me, asking for information; I'd been getting around through the crowds on my motorcycle and had a sense of what was going on there. Now one of my friends called and asked if I'd be willing to lead the buses in.

They explained who would be on the convoy: some local journalists I knew, some women from shelters that might be shut down by the Taliban. There would be four minibuses with more than a hundred people on board, many of them young children or elderly men and women. I knew that I was in a unique position to help them and that, in their desperation, they would go whether or not I did. So I said yes.



Two old friends had also volunteered, Andrew Quilty and Victor Blue, photojournalists who'd stayed behind in Kabul. The plan was to assemble the evacuees at the Serena Hotel downtown, and then drive to the airport. There was no way we could get through the crowds and traffic during the day, but if we left late enough at night, the roads might be clearer.

I'd ridden around the airport that afternoon to get a sense of the layout. On the north side, there was a road that ran along a wide sewage canal. Across the water, Hesco barriers and concrete walls were topped with guard towers, and on one I saw something I hadn't seen in days: the tricolor of the republic, fluttering in the breeze.

While the army and police had surrendered and deserted en masse around the country, the Zero Units had remained mostly intact. There was already a large force at Eagle Base, the C.I.A.'s paramilitary compound in northern Kabul, which the Taliban had agreed not to attack during the evacuation; the agency had helped rescue some of the units; others made their own way to the airport. One was the Orgun Strike Force from the southeastern border, which had participated in some of the United States' most secret missions, including covert operations inside Pakistan's tribal areas across the border. They were led by a longhaired, mustachioed commander whose operations that summer I'd been following on an Afghan government Facebook page. (A U.S. official requested that he not be identified by name, to protect his family.) The Orgun commander and his unit were given the ugly job of crowd control on the perimeter.

Coming around the north side of the airport, still a long way from the main military gate, I hit a traffic jam, and as I threaded the bike through I saw the reason. The Zero troopers, in their desert tiger camo, had taken over the road. They stood in front of a narrow passage formed by concrete blast walls. This new entrance, which some dubbed Glory Gate, was supposed to be a low-profile one for U.S. citizens and other priority cases, but large crowds were gathering there. When people pushed too close, the troopers fired shots in the air or brandished steel cables. A few days before, the crowd had gotten inside, and videos on social media showed the Zero troopers forcing them back, firing live ammunition overhead, women and kids screaming, a man bleeding in the dust.

Around 7 that evening, Vic and Quilty came to pick me up in a taxi. On our way to the Serena, we discussed the latest news: There'd been a report that ISIS was planning to attack the airport. The threat was real, but who knew how imminent it actually was? In any case, it wasn't going away. We arrived at the luxury hotel, which had been targeted several times by the Taliban. In one attack in 2014, my friend Sardar Ahmad, an Afghan journalist, was killed along with his wife and two of his children. It was unsettling when the door opened to reveal several bearded men with Kalashnikovs: the hotel's new Taliban security. We were led in with a group of evacuees, where a Talib searched my bag, before letting me through to the scanner.

"Pretty funny, huh?" I muttered to Vic as we walked through the hotel's driveway, passing more fighters. "This is insane," Vic replied.

In fact, the Serena was now one of the safest places in town, thanks to the Qatari Embassy, which had moved in earlier that year. The Qataris' strategy of hosting the Taliban's political office had paid off; they'd become a key intermediary between the West and the Islamists, and were now running their own evacuation convoys through the Taliban-controlled civilian gate.

As we entered the lobby, we could see Qatari special forces in black polo shirts with pistols. They had a convoy going tonight, and among the evacuees, I spotted Bilal Sarwary, a former BBC reporter, standing by the reception desk. We embraced.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"Not very good and not very bad — in between," he said, and laughed. "The time to process will come."

Sayara had rented a hall in the back where, over the next few hours, our own evacuees assembled, around 140 people. I was surprised at how many kids there were. I stood at the front and introduced myself and

Vic and Quilty, explaining we were going to get them safely to the airport. Looking at the rows of anxious faces, I tried to smile back with a confidence I didn't feel.

Although I hadn't put anyone on the list myself, it turned out that I knew a few of the people in our convoy. One of them was Ramin, the poet who'd recited at the party two months ago, sitting with a young woman with pale skin and high cheekbones.

"This is my wife," he said, standing up to greet me.

When I met Ramin earlier that summer, they had already been engaged; when Kabul fell, the two got married so that they could escape together, in a tiny home ceremony where they played music on a mobile phone, with the volume turned down in case a Taliban patrol passed by.

"Are you planning to leave, too?" Ramin asked.

I explained that I was coming back with the buses, along with Quilty and Vic.

"Our friends have suffered a lot," Ramin said. "Please be careful." The previous day, he and his wife went to one of the gates controlled by the Zero Units, where the crowd had been tear-gassed and they were nearly trampled. He went home, hopeless, and tried to fall asleep; when he got up, he learned that a friend from France had put him on the list for this convoy.

I was wondering about him the day before and, on a whim, I'd left him a voice message and recited one of his poems. "Yesterday, when you sent me the message, I was in the crowd," he said. "You read it very well."

"Thank you. It's a beautiful poem," Before the fall, I had hoped to translate his work, but I'd only managed to commit one to memory, a love poem:

*I'll stay with you like a scent on the body,  
I'll stay with you like a half-forgotten song.*

**At 2 a.m.,** the scout car that we sent ahead reported back: There was still a traffic jam outside the main military entrance, but the road was clear in front of Glory Gate. Sayara was in touch with a C.I.A. contact at the airport, and soon after, I got a call from someone who introduced himself as one of the Orgun commander's men, telling us to come.

It was shortly after 3 a.m. when we rolled out of Serena's gates. I chugged my third energy drink of the night and lit a cigarette. The city center was deserted. I was in the lead bus, and our driver decided to take a shortcut behind the old attorney general's office, where there was a height barrier intended to keep out trucks. As we passed under it, there was a crunch, and he slammed on the brakes. When he tried reversing, the metal roof began to shriek in protest. He'd wedged us under the barrier.

Twenty yards ahead, I saw a green laser sweep the road and fix on our bus. Three turbaned figures, carrying rifles, stepped out from the shadows and headed toward us.

"It's the Taliban," someone behind me whispered.

The other buses drove around us, where the barrier was higher, and sped off. Our driver was reversing back and forth, trying to get us unstuck, but the lead Talib broke into a jog and raised his hand for us to stop.

"Salaam alaikum," I called out the window, trying to smile.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"The airport," I said.

He stared inside at the bus crammed full of families with their luggage. "*Mawlawi sahib!*" He called to his commander. "They're going to the airport." The other waved us away.

"Be careful you don't get shot," the Talib said.

We got out from under the barrier, made a U-turn and took another street, where we linked up with the other three buses, and sped onward to the airport road. No more checkpoints. Soon we saw the neon lights of the gas station across from Glory Gate. I was worried about the trigger-happy troopers, and the mob outside. I texted the group to remind them to lock the windows.

"We're close, slow down."

The road was clear, but there were still hundreds of people hanging around the dirt lots along the road. Clouds of dust whirled up as we approached; the floodlights from the gate cast the shadows of concertina wire through the murk. A Zero trooper came forward and leveled his rifle at my bus.

"Get out of here!" he screamed. "Go!"

"We're the Sayara convoy!" I shouted back. Leaning out the window, I recited the names we'd been given by the C.I.A.

Hearing them, the trooper dropped his barrel, and motioned for us to wait. After a few minutes, another came forward and took my passport. They had us pull forward, out of the road. Then I saw a bearded figure come from the gate, his muscular calves apparent under his shorts — an unusual sight since Afghans don't wear shorts in public. He shone a flashlight on me, then on my passport.

"Hey, how are you?" he said in English. He asked about where we'd come from and who the passengers were.

"It's all civilians," I said.

"Well, you came to the right gate," he said, and grinned.

He was an American operator, most likely with the C.I.A.'s paramilitary branch. He explained that we'd unload the buses, one at a time, so that the passengers could go through on foot to be searched. Then we'd load up again on the other side, and head into the airport.

I stood to the side and watched as the passengers, many still terrified, filed off and went inside. With the floodlights behind me now, the Zero troopers seemed forlorn in the dust, the remnants of a once mighty army, now carrying out a final, grim duty. Occasionally, there was a crack of gunfire: more warning shots against the crowd. Seated in a plastic chair by the gate was a large man with a drooping mustache. He was looking down at his phone, listening to a voice message.

He looked familiar. I asked if he was the Orgun commander.

He turned his exhausted gaze up to me. "Yes," he said.

"I recognized you from your Facebook photos," I said. So this was the man who'd been the scourge of the borderlands.

He smiled sadly. "Thank you."

It took half an hour to get all four buses through the gate. As the last passengers were being checked, I walked over to where Vic was waiting. It was almost 4:30, and the dawn prayer was being called. A chorus of barking dogs rose from the wastes around us.

The second operator led us in his truck as we drove through the concrete passageways, past a blasted-out armored vehicle, through an inner gate manned by U.S. Army soldiers, until we finally reached the edge of the tarmac. A vast panorama opened before us: the lights of distant planes, like ships on the open sea, and in the foreground, the hulking airframes of C-17s and C-130s, their ramps down, lines of refugees walking onboard. Far to the south, we could see the civilian terminal. The sound of jet engines was deafening.

Our buses followed the C.I.A. truck to the military terminal, where there were U.S. Marines everywhere; some standing guard on the flight line, others crashed along a fence, sleeping against their rucksacks. There were soldiers from other NATO countries as well, sent to evacuate their nationals and local staff. Afghans sat together in groups, wherever they could find an open space to rest amid drifts of trash, empty water bottles and rations.

**Now we had** to get our evacuees to their plane, so that we could go home; I'd been told Sayara's charter flight was already on the tarmac. The buses pulled to a halt next to a disabled Afghan Air Force C-130, a few hundred yards from the terminal. The operator, a burly man in a baseball T-shirt, got down from his truck and came over to me.

"I would not take these people out of the bus," he said. He looked at the military planes around us. "Civilian charter. ... I don't see a civilian charter."

As we walked toward the terminal, he explained that Marines were kicking some people off who didn't have proper documents; we didn't want to get the Sayara group mixed up with the others. "There's around 20,000 people on this base right now, waiting for flights," he said.

At the terminal, the Marine in charge, a harried lieutenant colonel, was polite, but said he didn't know where to put our group, either. We were the C.I.A.'s responsibility; the operator suggested that he and I drive over their compound to figure things out, so I got into his armored pickup.

Dawn was breaking on the tarmac. He blinked with fatigue as he explained that he arrived a couple of days before, part of a team rushed to help out with the evacuation. "Everybody thought that it was going to last longer," he said. "We knew it was gonna fall, but we thought months."

"Have you been here before?" I asked.

"Double-digit times, man. You lose count."

He said the C.I.A. had been pulling people out all over the country: American citizens and important assets, often through touch-and-go missions into Taliban-held territory.

A C.I.A. spokeswoman later told me, "The C.I.A. worked closely with other U.S. government agencies to support in various ways the evacuation of thousands of American citizens, local embassy staff and vulnerable Afghans."

We arrived at an area with several hangars that the C.I.A. had taken over. Two C-17s were loading at its ramp, with a long line of men, women and children behind each, carrying bags and bundles. The Zero Units were allowed to bring their immediate family members, and the operator said that given the large size of Afghan families, it would add up to thousands. Each C-17 could carry 400 people, and one had to get out every two hours. They were already behind.

The Sayara team had finally sent me the tail number for their charter plane, so we decided to go over to the civilian side of the airport and see if we could find it.

We drove around the west end of the runway. The operator stopped and looked both ways for jets before we crossed. "I don't know who's in some of these buildings," he said. The airport was a mess. The Taliban were supposed to stay on the outside of the civilian terminal, but the perimeter was worryingly porous.

“There’s a Kam Air flight there,” he said.

A jet with orange livery was parked on the tarmac. We got closer and read the tail number; it was the right plane, but it did not look as if it would be flying any time soon.

My phone buzzed again, and I read a message from my friend at Sayara aloud: “Hey I just talked to the plane people, and this charter is far from secured. It might be days.”

We circled around in the truck.

“Huh,” he finally said. We headed back to the C.I.A. ramp, where the C-17s were still loading. Inside the hangars, I could see masses of bedding and garbage. “It’s a humanitarian disaster,” he sighed. He seemed bitter about the way the Zero Units had given up the fight, like the rest of the Afghan forces.

He was coming off his shift, so he handed me off to a colleague, another bearded operator, who dropped me off in a hangar to wait on instructions from above about what to do with Sayara evacuees. Three young Marines sat at a folding table in front of laptops, registering Zero troopers and their families.

I poured myself some coffee and sat down, watching the scene. The contrast with the military’s side of the airport, where there were Marines everywhere, was revealing; here, around a dozen C.I.A. paramilitary officers were handling thousands of locals, many of them armed but obedient. Their faithfulness was being rewarded with passage to America. And as the only Afghan forces who controlled part of the perimeter, they had the ability to bring their own people inside. I wondered how these men, who had been fighting a vicious battle in the borderlands with Al Qaeda and ISIS, would adjust to life in the United States.

The operator returned with a clamshell full of pancakes and sausage, which I wolfed down gratefully. We discussed what to do with the Sayara convoy; the best solution seemed to be to leave them with the Marines, after all. We drove back over to the buses and pulled around to the entrance, where everyone got down with their bags. We still needed to find somewhere for them, for the long wait ahead; I spotted a Marine sergeant, and explained the situation, as we had to his colonel a few hours ago. He was a young guy with red hair and a raspy voice.

“Yeah, how about right there?” he said, pointing to a small outdoor waiting area next to the terminal. He grabbed a couple of his Marines, and within a few minutes they had kicked out some others hanging around to make room for all 140 of Sayara’s evacuees.

We said goodbye and wished them luck, and then Vic, Quilty and I got back on the buses and rode back into the city. The sun was bright, and the crowds were already starting to gather — the few with papers to get inside and the many without them.

**As August reached** its end and America’s self-imposed deadline for the evacuation neared, the violence at the airport grew more frenzied. Sayara asked us to lead another convoy two days later, this time with five buses. We made it to Glory Gate in the early hours of the morning, but this time Sayara’s connection to the C.I.A. failed. The operator on duty, one we had seen before, refused to let us through. Sitting outside in the buses, I watched a huge convoy arrive from nearby [Eagle Base, which the C.I.A. was getting ready to blow up.](#)

The Orgun commander was gone, one of the troopers outside said. He seemed high on something; his pupils were enormous. He giggled and fluttered his hand. “He flew away.”

Our friends at Sayara tried to work their contacts with the U.S. government, sending us to different gates as daylight broke and the crowds grew. One of our buses broke down; a mob tried to break inside; we made a last-ditch attempt at the Taliban-controlled gate, but when I got down to try talk with them, a fighter started punching me in the head. In the end, we were lucky to get everyone back to the Serena alive.

On Aug. 26, an ISIS suicide bomber made his way through the crowd to the Marines at Abbey Gate and detonated his vest, [killing 13 American troops](#). Jim and I went down to the site and then to the emergency hospital, where they were bringing in bodies on stretchers. Almost 200 people were killed; it seemed like too many for a single bomber. Some might have been trampled or drowned in the sewage ditch; according to several witnesses I spoke to, the Marines, who must have feared another bomber, also fired on those who panicked and tried to climb the walls. A doctor at a government hospital said that many of the casualties he saw had bullet wounds. (A spokesman said there was no evidence the Marines shot anyone during the evacuation.)

Three days later, the United States carried out a drone strike inside the city, on what it said was another ISIS terrorist. The top U.S. general told the public it was a “righteous strike.” We went to the house the next morning, where, in a courtyard strewn with a charred sedan and bits of flesh, a family and their neighbors wept in rage and grief. The drone’s Hellfire had killed 10 innocent people, seven of them children, as [the military would later admit](#). That was the last known missile fired in what they once called the good war.

**Nightfall brought an** intensification of air traffic; I’d lie in bed and listen to the planes, trying to distinguish the roar of C-17s and fighter jets, the buzz of Reaper drones, the hum of a C-130’s propellers as it climbed from the tarmac. The night of Aug. 30 was the busiest we’d heard it yet, and then, shortly before midnight, it tapered off. Jim and I walked out into the yard and marveled at the quiet. Then we heard scattered gunshots, followed by more, until it sounded as if we were at the center of a raging gun battle. Every Talib in the city was firing into the air, celebrating the departure of the last American soldier. From our window, we could see red tracer fire crisscrossing above the city, deadly fireworks.

The next morning, the Taliban held a news conference at the airport. Their soldiers at the gate let us through; Jim and I walked down the long avenue, brass cartridges scattered underfoot. Heaps of suitcases, their contents emptied into piles, littered the median. The terminal parking lot was a snarl of abandoned vehicles left behind, ordinary cars, U.N. four-by-fours and armored S.U.V.s, some flipped on their sides or parked nose to nose as barricades: One big GM, blocking the road sideways, had its plated window punched open by gunfire. The Taliban guards here were just waking up from last night’s party; they had a big dog with them, probably one of the many left behind during the evacuation; the terminal was full of shattered glass, its furniture overturned, pallets of water bottles and M.R.E.s scattered around. It was like a hurricane-ravaged, abandoned coast.

The ceremony was on the military side, so the Taliban gave us a ride in the bed of a truck that had belonged to a Zero Unit, the kid at the wheel speeding recklessly across the tarmac, taking us to where the officials were giving a victory speech in front of a listing, disabled C-130. Their special forces were lined up, wearing helmets and uniforms. Suddenly, we heard a bang, and I turned to see two Rangers colliding out on the runway, one rolling and flipping high into the air before it crashed down. The ceremony went on.

Afterward, Jim and I walked back out through the gate; and stood staring at the roundabout where traffic was flowing normally. Apart from a small group of onlookers, the crowds were gone. The spell was broken.

“There aren’t any foreigners inside?” a street kid asked. He had a can of incense on a wire.

“No,” I said. “They’re gone.”

#### **Part 4** **The Emirate**

After the fall of the capital, it took time to get used to seeing Taliban at the checkpoint outside our house. In the days that followed, their scarce numbers in Kabul were bolstered by fighters from the provinces, arriving with the long hair and beards that would have gotten them profiled for arrest in the capital not long ago. Young, off-duty Taliban wandered around, clutching their weapons and staring at the bright lights and gaudy storefronts, while the city dwellers looked back warily. Although the Taliban rank and

file had been ordered not to harass residents, the men of Kabul swapped jeans for traditional garb, while the women wore concealing clothes, if they ventured out at all. Abandoned by their leaders and security forces, the capital's residents waited for what would befall them under the Islamic Emirate.

On Aug. 17, just two days after they captured Kabul, the Taliban held their first news conference. Jim and I rode down to the government media center, located inside the former Green Zone, where we found a line of local reporters waiting outside, their tailored suits traded for robes. Inside, we sat in front of a dais flanked by marble staircases, waiting for [Zabihullah Mujahed, the longtime Taliban spokesman](#), whose voice we knew but whose face we'd never seen. After a moment, Mujahed and his aides descended stage left. He took his seat in front of the microphones. A diminutive, well-spoken man, he wore a turban in a tribal pattern from eastern Afghanistan. He announced that the Taliban would keep their promise of an *afwa*, the general amnesty.

"We have pardoned all those who had fought against us," he said. "The Islamic Emirate does not have any animosity with anyone. The fighting has come to an end, and we want to live in peace."

For a movement confident in its victory, and in need of domestic and international support, the announcement made sense. And despite dire expectations, Kabul had fallen with remarkably little bloodshed. There were no massacres or roundups, and so far the few high-profile politicians who hadn't evacuated, like Karzai, had been left in peace. "You thought the Taliban were going to devour and kill everyone, but that didn't happen," Ayubi, one of the commanders who'd taken over the palace, told me. Afghans were tired of war, he said, and the Emirate wanted to halt the cycle of killings and retribution that had raged for four decades.

But even if the leadership was sincere, could they control their fighters? I met a young commander named Mullah Sangin who, like many of the Taliban in the city, rushed here from a neighboring province after the fall. Sangin was from Wardak's Tangi Valley, and he told me he was one of a few survivors from a group that had shot down a helicopter carrying Navy SEALs there in 2011. Tall and gaunt, wearing a black turban, Sangin was only in his late 20s but now led a group of a couple of dozen men within the intelligence commission. Restaurants and other businesses had started to reopen in the capital, and we ate lunch at the same spot where I'd gone with the interpreters the day the city fell. The staff was surprised to see me arrive with the Talib commander and his Kalashnikov-toting driver. Sangin and I sat across from each other, smiling at how surreal it was to be meeting like this. I was the first non-Muslim he'd ever shared a meal with, he told me; he was used to thinking of foreigners as invaders. "But you're a guest in our country," he said.

This summer, as the prospect of victory began to seem real, the leadership had emphasized the order to spare the life and property of those who surrendered. During the Eid al-Adha celebration in July, the amir, Haibatullah Akhунzada, had disseminated a message over WhatsApp explaining that a general amnesty would be granted once the Taliban were victorious, just as the Prophet Muhammad had done after capturing Mecca 14 centuries earlier. Sangin said it even included the Zero Units, his mortal enemies, who were still guarding the evacuation in progress at the airport.

"We were greatly wronged by them, but we will forgive them, because when the amir gives an order, we must obey," he told me. He referred to the religious concept of *eta'at*; disobedience to one's amir was a sin. But Haibatullah, a religious scholar from Kandahar, had yet to appear in public, and Sangin and his men, like the rest of the country, were waiting to see what kind of government the Taliban would institute. He was certain about one thing: It would be an emirate, not a republic. "Our constitution is the Quran and Islam," he told me.

**When I showed** up at Rangina's house, there were no guards outside anymore, and her government-issued armored S.U.V. was gone from the driveway. When the Taliban had taken it, they'd assured her she would be safe. But she was getting ready to evacuate; there was only a week remaining until Aug. 31, the deadline for the troops to leave, and she and Abdullah had decided to take Zara and get out.



The day before, Rangina had been invited to a meeting at the ministry with members of the Taliban's education commission. Schools were closed since the collapse of the republic, but Rangina had wondered if they might ask her to continue in a temporary capacity, like Waheed Majrooh, the minister of public health, who'd remained and helped keep the hospitals running through the violence at the airport. Rangina arrived with her deputy to find several older men in turbans sitting in her office. They were formal but polite; one turned out to be from a village in Kandahar next to her father's. Together, they went to speak to the ministry's senior staff. After thanking God for their victory, one of the Taliban officials gave a speech about placing Islam at the center of a new curriculum — now their fundamentalist vision would shape the next generation of Afghan children.

Afterward, the officials served her melon in the office. She wanted to know whether girls would be denied higher education as they were in the 1990s. The Taliban assured her that they would be allowed to study past sixth grade, but only after a system was worked out to keep men and women separate, in accordance with religious law.

"I don't know if their definition of Shariah has changed from 20 years ago or if it's the same Shariah — that's the big question," Rangina told me. "Shariah is not a book that you can pick up and say, 'Here's Shariah.' It's history and laws and regulations over 1,400 years, and it's open to interpretation."

The officials told her she no longer had a job at the ministry, but they asked her to stay in Afghanistan. They suggested she could help them by speaking to the media and telling the world they weren't the monsters they were made out to be. Rangina was offended. "They just want me as their female spokesperson," she said.

As a former minister and U.S. citizen, Rangina had been prioritized for evacuation. As we talked, her phone rang, and she answered it. It was a Marine, calling from the military base in Qatar. "If we can help you out, would you be willing to work with us to get through a gate in HKIA and get put on an airplane?" The next day, her deputy, Attaullah Wahidyar, drove them in a truck to Glory Gate, with Zara sitting quietly beside her and Abdullah in the back seat. Rangina was racked with guilt over leaving; maybe if she stayed, the Taliban would be willing to listen to her. Wahidyar was certain she was making the right decision. "They would have used her," he told me later. "You can't say no to a Talib with a gun."

In the back of the pickup speeding toward the airport, Rangina wept as she remembered another journey she'd taken as a scared child more than 30 years ago. In the middle of the night, her father had taken the family and fled the Communists in a truck like this one, and they'd become refugees. But now the little girl in the back seat was her own daughter, and she was sitting in her father's place. And Ghulam Haider was dead, murdered, a martyr for the lost republic and the country she was leaving behind.

**A few days** after the evacuation ended, I passed by the office of Etilaat-e Roz and was surprised to find Zaki still there. A couple of weeks earlier, he'd told me that he and his staff had decided to leave while they still had a chance to get out. But they hadn't been able to get through the crowds at the airport. Zaki had been offered a place on our Sayara convoy, but he wasn't willing to go without his colleagues. The Qataris, who were helping the Taliban get the airport running again, were still flying out some evacuees, so Zaki was hopeful that they could leave as a group in the coming days. A few of Zaki's journalists were sitting around the office, looking depressed. They told me they hadn't been out reporting yet; they were afraid of the Taliban on the street. I tried to reassure them by recounting how Mujahed, the spokesman, had given me a letter of permission, and that I'd been able to keep working, even interview Taliban officials.

Two days later, I got a message from Zaki saying that some of his staff had been arrested covering a protest by women's rights activists outside a police station. I rushed over, but by the time I got to his office, they had already been released. Two were beaten so badly that they had to be taken to the hospital, including Zaki's younger brother, Taqi. I went over and persuaded the nervous staff to let me in; the two reporters were just being wheeled out of the X-ray department.

“Hi, Matthieu,” Nemat Naqdi whispered from his gurney. I peered at the gauze swaddling his face and realized, with a stab of guilt, that he was one of the young journalists I’d exhorted to get out and work. He and Taqi, who hadn’t gotten permits from the Taliban, were arrested at the demonstration, taken into a room and whipped. Nemat was hit so hard that he lost partial vision in his right eye.

Taliban officials would later apologize for the incident, but no action was taken against the fighters who were now functioning as the police. According to the Taliban, public protests were illegal without a permit, and given the current emergency situation, permits would not be granted. Covering such protests was illegal, too. Although the Taliban claimed that free speech would be allowed “within the limits of Islam,” they had never made any pretense to liberalism. When I sat for an interview with Mujahed, he told me that democracy and Islam were incompatible; in the former, the people were sovereign, but according to the latter, God and the Quran ruled. In a world where even dictators paid lip service to democracy, the Taliban offered a remarkably frank vision for a religious theocracy.

And yet, like Mullah Baradar, the chief negotiator in Doha, Mujahed was seen as representing a relatively moderate tendency within the Taliban, one that advocated a pragmatic engagement with the world. There was still hope for the “inclusive” approach that had been promised under the agreement scuttled by Ghani’s escape, but [the interim cabinet announced](#) on Sept. 7 was drawn from the movement’s old guard — most were Pashtun, many were elderly clerics and all were men. The Taliban’s total military victory had strengthened its hard-liners. Baradar, who many in the West had expected to lead the new cabinet, was made a deputy.

Rangina’s replacement as acting minister of education had previously run a madrasa in Pakistan. When high schools were reopened in September, only boys were given permission to return; while in some provinces girls were also quietly allowed, as the end of the year approached, most in the country were still being kept out of school.

**The heat of** the summer passed. The nights grew longer. On crisp mornings, the smell of wood smoke filled the air in Kabul. The city’s residents and the Taliban fighters were adjusting to one another; some of the jeans reappeared, while the Taliban donned a patchwork of uniforms that had belonged to the republic. When I had visited the remnants of the C.I.A.’s Eagle Base, the fighters who accompanied our group of journalists on a tour wore operator-style helmets and carried American-made weapons; some even wore the tiger stripes of the Zero Units.

In the end, nearly everyone who could leave left. Zaki and his team made it out to the transit camps in Doha to await resettlement in the United States, as did Mahdi and Nadim, the translators I interviewed the day the city fell. Ghani was in Abu Dhabi writing a book, a follow-up to “Fixing Failed States,” perhaps. Rangina moved to Arizona with Abdullah and Zara, where she was offered a teaching job at a university.

The Orgun commander and the Zero Unit troopers were sent to military bases in America, where they would begin new lives as refugees. Ramin and his wife were given an artist’s residency in a French farmhouse, where he was writing of his longing for his city, a Kabul that now lived on in the imagination of a new diaspora.

Although daily life had returned to the capital’s streets, after dark they quickly emptied out, apart from the fighters standing at intersections. I stayed inside, too — my friends were gone from this city where the music had fallen silent. I was longing to get out, and finally, more than two months after the fall of Kabul, I headed south, toward Kandahar. Akbar and I took turns at the wheel; the valleys of Wardak stretched out, barren mountains behind them. We rolled down the windows and breathed the clear air, careful to turn down the stereo at checkpoints. Highway 1, which had been a battleground for more than a decade, was safe enough now to drive at night, although you had to watch for the craters from roadside bombs, which the emirate was slowly trying to patch. The farther we traveled from Kabul, the less nostalgia people seemed to have for the republic. In Panjwai, outside Kandahar City, the farmers had dug up the I.E.D.s and were planting crops. Everywhere, white flags fluttered above the graves of young men.

“Not a day would go by without dozens of bodies coming back along this road,” Akbar said. He was from a valley north of Kabul that had provided many recruits for the Afghan Army. He had never been to the south before; now he sat with farmers in pomegranate orchards, comparing their experiences on opposite sides of the war. “We thought the people here have been cruel to kill so many of our sons like that. Now I see they suffered just as much. Maybe more.”

For ordinary people in the countryside, the fall of the republic had at least brought an end to the fighting. But the Taliban hounded former officials, searching their homes for weapons and government vehicles. In Kandahar, I was told about a quiet [campaign of kidnappings and assassinations of former police and intelligence officers by Taliban fighters](#) — which their leaders denied — some driven by local disputes, others by revenge.

Akbar and I drove westward to Helmand. Outside the cities, we saw few armed men. We passed the bases built with foreign money, many bearing the scars of final battles. Most were empty, with only a white flag fluttering above; some whose Hesco barriers had been raided of wire for scrap were now melting back into the earth. It felt as if the country, deprived of a constant input of dollars, was returning to a lower energy state. The economy was in free fall, the banks were out of cash; it had been a drought year, and everyone feared the hunger that winter would bring.

On the highway near Shurabak, we passed a series of concrete walls, which I recognized as the entry points for the enormous air base that had been run by the Marines. I thought about my visits there, when the runway was crowded with jets, and tried to remember the brash generals who’d explained, year after year, how they were winning — they just needed more troops, more money, more time. Twenty years had passed, long enough for a child to be raised, to finish her studies and become a young woman. That was the life span of the republic. Now the dream was over and America was gone, along with an elite that fled even before the last foreign soldier was out, leaving behind [a country on the brink of starvation](#).

We kept driving to Nimruz and reached the Iranian border. Here the desert began. A great exodus was underway. We watched as the migrants crowded onto trucks, heading west.

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HEADLINE	12/10 JBLM soldier to receive Medal of Honor
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.q13fox.com/news/soldier-stationed-at-jblm-to-receive-white-house-medal-of-honor">https://www.q13fox.com/news/soldier-stationed-at-jblm-to-receive-white-house-medal-of-honor</a>
GIST	<p><b>WASHINGTON</b> - President Joe Biden will award the Medal of Honor next week to three U.S. soldiers who fought in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the White House said Friday.</p> <p>The soldiers are Sgt. 1st Class Christopher Celiz, an Army Ranger who died after stepping between Taliban fighters and a U.S. helicopter evacuating wounded in 2018; Master Sgt. Earl Plumlee, a Special Forces soldier who fought off Taliban insurgents after massive attack in Afghanistan in 2013; and Sgt. 1st Class Alwyn Cashe, 35, who died in Iraq while rescuing fellow soldiers from a burning vehicle in 2005.</p> <p>Plumlee is currently serving with the 1st Special Forces Group at Fort Lewis, Washington.</p> <p>He was serving at a base in Ghazni, Afghanistan, when it came under massive attack, with insurgents blowing a sixty-foot breach in the base’s perimeter wall.</p> <p>Ten insurgents wearing Afghan National Army uniforms and suicide vests poured through the breach. Plumlee and five Special Operations members mounted two vehicles and raced toward the site of the detonation.</p> <p>He killed two insurgents, one with a well-placed grenade and the other by using precision sniper fire to detonate the insurgent’s suicide vest. He engaged several others at close range.</p> <p>At one point in the battle, an insurgent detonated his suicide vest, mortally wounding a fellow U.S. soldier.</p> <p>Plumlee ran to the wounded soldier, carried him to safety and rendered first aid.</p>

	The three will be recognized at a White House ceremony on Dec. 16.
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## Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	12/13 End Korea war declaration agreement?
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/korean-war-end-war-declaration-agreed-principle-moon/story?id=81713423">https://abcnews.go.com/International/korean-war-end-war-declaration-agreed-principle-moon/story?id=81713423</a>
GIST	<p>SEOUL, South Korea -- South Korea says the United States, China, and North Korea agreed on “fundamental and principle levels” to declare a formal end to the Korean War that ended in 1953 without a peace treaty.</p> <p>South Korean President Moon Jae-in also told reporters that his government is “not considering” a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics. “We have not been offered to participate [in the boycott] by any country, including the United States,” he said at a joint press conference on Monday after bilateral summit talks with Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison in Canberra, Australia.</p> <p>“If North Korea shows strong intention to discuss the end-of-war declaration further, that’s at least a message that they are willing to come to the [nuclear] negotiations table,” Philo Kim, professor at the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies in Seoul, told ABC News.</p> <p>Talks for denuclearization have been at a standstill since the U.S.-North Korea Hanoi summit in February 2019 ended without an agreement.</p> <p>But many experts in Seoul say the end-of-war declaration is only symbolic and could only benefit President Moon nearing the end of his five-year term as a personal achievement. “The administration may think it will be a breakthrough to resume dialogue but I don’t think it’s a realistic alternative,” Du Hyeogn Cha, an analyst at Seoul’s Asan Institute for Policy Studies, told ABC News.</p> <p>Moon is also hoping to keep communications with North Korea ongoing by sending diplomatic envoys to the Beijing Olympics, experts say. It is highly likely that North Korea’s top leaders, including North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, will attend the Beijing Olympics given North Korea’s close ties with China.</p> <p>“Through the Beijing Olympics, Moon may be hoping to talk to North Korea on a summit level,” Shin Beom-chul, director of the Center for Diplomacy and Security at the Korea Research Institute for National Strategy, told ABC news.</p> <p>Stuck in the middle of the balance-of-power struggle between the United States and China, Moon told reporters he is “trying to maintain a harmonious relationship with China while building on a solid alliance with the United States.”</p> <p>“South Korea is in a very difficult position. It just can’t go all-in on its alliance with the US because there is much at stake when it comes to China. Beijing has strong influence in the peace and stability of the Korean peninsula as it is a powerful backup to Pyongyang,” South Korea’s former ambassador to Japan Shin Kak-soo told ABC news.</p> <p>Moon on a 4-days state visit to Australia also struck a \$720 million defense deal in which South Korean defense company Hanwha would sell artillery weapons, supply vehicles and radars to the Australian army. Morrison said the new defense contract would create about 300 jobs in Australia, where a division of Hanwha operates. Australia recently announced a deal to build nuclear-powered submarines in a partnership with the U.S. and Britain—a move that China has strongly condemned.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/12 Role-playing helps police do job
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2021/12/12/role-play-police-shootings/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2021/12/12/role-play-police-shootings/</a>
GIST	<p>If confronted by the man a few months earlier, the four police officers from Inglewood, Calif., might have killed him.</p> <p>But the officers had practiced situations like this in simulation training, learning to slow their responses and look for other options. As the man walked toward them, insisting he was armed with a knife and a gun, they used their cars as barricades and fired foam projectiles that are far less lethal than bullets.</p> <p>Eventually, they handcuffed the man and took him for a psychiatric evaluation.</p> <p>“The officers did feel the training prevented them from using deadly force,” Sgt. Joseph Cupo, who oversees training for the Inglewood Police Department, said of the June 2020 incident, weeks after the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis launched a national conversation on public safety. “It gave them the knowledge to recognize the event for what it potentially could be, and to go through some alternative methods to bring it to resolution.”</p> <p>At a time when police use of force is increasingly under scrutiny, experts say training simulations are a key way to reduce the number of times police fire their weapons. There are a variety of role-playing options and a growing body of evidence that they work. Some use live actors, others project videotaped scenarios on screens that wrap around the room. A few places, including a laboratory at the University of Maryland, helped design virtual reality headsets that surround officers with videos or computer-generated images, like in a video game.</p> <p>Experts say each approach can be valuable so long as it feels realistic. The key is that the officer isn’t just learning de-escalation skills in a classroom but is acting them out, over and over, until they become second nature.</p> <p>“Giving police officers the ability to practice these scenarios, particularly when they’re very young in their careers, is really important,” said Rashawn Ray, a sociology professor who heads up the Lab for Applied Social Science Research at the University of Maryland at College Park.</p> <p>Both he and Robin Engel, a criminal justice professor at the University of Cincinnati, noted that police officers generally spend far less time on de-escalation training than on firearms practice, even though the vast majority of police interactions involve unarmed civilians.</p> <p>Engel began researching de-escalation training in 2018. She’d been asked to find ways to improve accountability in the campus police department at her university, where an officer had recently shot an unarmed Black man during a traffic stop.</p> <p>She found that in nearby Louisville, de-escalation training created by the nonprofit Police Executive Research Forum corresponded to a 28 percent reduction in officer use-of-force incidents, a 26 percent reduction in citizen injuries and a 36 percent reduction in officer injuries.</p> <p>The training is aimed at defusing tense situations officers may encounter on patrol, Engel said. It does not address higher-risk scenarios like the raid in Louisville that led to the <a href="#">police shooting of Breonna Taylor</a>, an unarmed Black woman whose boyfriend exchanged gunfire with police.</p> <p>But proponents say it helps police develop alternative, nonlethal responses to situations where a person is acting erratically or threatening to use force.</p> <p>In Newark, officers did not fire a single shot on duty last year, which Public Safety Director Brian O’Hara said is at least partly because of training in which community volunteers assist in scenario-based instruction.</p>

In Camden, N.J., officers haven't fired a lethal weapon in the line of duty since 2017, and complaints for excessive use of force have dropped from 44 in 2015 to five last year. Again, officials say simulation training played a role.

The Camden County Police Department sometimes has officers wear heart monitors while they train in de-escalation and conflict resolution, and supervisors keep tabs on whether the officers' voices become louder or crack from anxiety, how they move their bodies, what they're doing with their hands and whether they're perspiring. The agency also reviews body-camera footage as "game film," department spokesman Dan Keashen said, to show officers what they did right and wrong.

"I can tell you, it absolutely works — 100 percent," Keashen said.

The more realistic the scenario, the more prepared officers will be. The question is, which technology gives the most realistic experience? Chuck Wexler, executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum, touts the model that group created, which is called [Integrating Communications, Assessment and Tactics](#) and uses live actors who respond to the officers in the moment. But he acknowledged that type of training was more labor-intensive and costly than systems that rely on technology.

Some companies, like VirTra, project taped scenarios on screens around the room. A supervisor or trainer can act like a puppeteer, choosing how those on screen respond to whatever action the officer takes.

Axon, the creator of the Taser, offers a virtual-reality headset in which actors play out fraught scenarios and the trainee makes choices, such as whether to use a Taser, chemical spray or a gun to keep a man in mental distress at bay. The subject responds accordingly.

Rick Wall, a retired Los Angeles Police Department captain who now runs de-escalation trainings, prefers live actors but said using them for role-play is cost prohibitive for all but the biggest departments. And more than half of [fatal police shootings](#) occur in jurisdictions with fewer than 50,000 residents, according to a 2018 study in the Annual Review of Criminology.

"That's why a lot of agencies are moving toward the virtual reality," Wall said. "It works, and it's less expensive."

Matthew Griffin, a former police officer who now trains for Axon, recalled sitting through 40 hours of desk-based in-service training a year while he wore the badge. Officers learned things like how to identify whether a person they were interacting with might have autism, schizophrenia or Alzheimer's disease.

But he thinks simulations are far more effective. In Axon's virtual-reality scenarios, for example, officers can act as a person with autism or schizophrenia interacting with police, and then switch back to the officer's role. Griffin said such training leaves officers better able to recognize the cognitive or mental health issues they may be confronting on the job.

Most virtual-reality simulations require a trainer or the officer to press a button to get the subject in the video to respond to a particular action. But Jigsaw, the technology incubator for tech giant Google, has created a program called [Trainer](#) that uses artificial intelligence, based on data gathered from law enforcement and civil rights groups, to prompt actions and responses.

Every time officers put on a headset, their experience is different. The scenarios offer hundreds of potential outcomes — albeit with avatars that do not appear completely human, a technological limitation that experts say can prevent the user from becoming completely immersed in the scene.

Axon expects to upgrade its virtual-reality headsets next year to include similar artificial intelligence direction.



On a recent day at the University of Maryland lab in College Park, researcher Connor Powelson put on a virtual-reality headset and was transported to the driver's seat of a police car, making a traffic stop in a working-class neighborhood.

Powelson, who is White, walked up to the driver, who is Black, and said, "My name is Officer Powelson. I stopped you because you ran a stop sign back there."

As he asked for the license and registration, a woman across the street began recording the interaction with her cellphone and yelled, "Leave the poor kid alone!"

The officer turned. "Ma'am, you're allowed to film, but I need you to stay over there."

The situation felt a little tense, like anything could happen.

But there also were some glitches, including prolonged delays where the driver wasn't saying anything, or moments when the simulated dialogue didn't make sense.

Ray, the sociology professor, said the slow Internet connection in the basement lab was partly culpable. Overall, he said, officers who have reviewed the system found it "slightly more realistic" than other training simulations they have seen.

The technology gives trainers a checklist to use as officers run through the scenarios. The trainers can bookmark spots in the video where the officer completed a task properly, or failed to do so, then play the video again and discuss what to do differently.

Jigsaw has given the technology to researchers at four universities — the University of Maryland, University of Cincinnati, Georgetown University Law Center and Morehouse College. All plan to test it on police.

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HEADLINE	12/12 Map, disappearing Taiwan minister
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/curious-case-map-disappearing-taiwan-minister-us-democracy-summit-2021-12-12/">https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/curious-case-map-disappearing-taiwan-minister-us-democracy-summit-2021-12-12/</a>
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON, Dec 12 (Reuters) - A video feed of a Taiwanese minister was cut during U.S. President Joe Biden's Summit for Democracy last week after a map in her slide presentation showed Taiwan in a different color to China, which claims the island as its own.</p> <p>Sources familiar with the matter told Reuters that Friday's slide show by Taiwanese Digital Minister Audrey Tang caused consternation among U.S. officials after the map appeared in her video feed for about a minute.</p> <p>The sources, who did not want to be identified due to the sensitivity of the matter, said the video feed showing Tang was cut during a panel discussion and replaced with audio only - at the behest of the White House.</p> <p>The White House was concerned that differentiating Taiwan and China on a map in a U.S.-hosted conference - to which Taiwan had been invited in a show of support at a time when it is under intense pressure from Beijing - could be seen as being at odds with Washington's "one-China" policy, which avoids taking a position as to whether Taiwan is part of China, the sources said.</p> <p>The State Department said "confusion" over screen-sharing resulted in Tang's video feed being dropped, calling it "an honest mistake."</p> <p>"We valued Minister Tang's participation, which showcased Taiwan's world-class expertise on issues of transparent governance, human rights, and countering disinformation," a spokesperson said.</p>



Tang's presentation included a color-coded map from South African NGO CIVICUS, ranking the world by openness on civil rights.

Most of Asia was shown, with Taiwan colored green, making it the only regional entity portrayed as "open," while all the others, including several U.S. allies and partners, were labeled as being "closed," "repressed," "obstructed" or "narrowed."

China, Laos, Vietnam and North Korea were colored red and labeled "closed."

When the moderator returned to Tang a few minutes later, there was no video of her, just audio, and a screenshot captioned: "Minister Audrey Tang Taiwan." An onscreen disclaimer later declared: "Any opinions expressed by individuals on this panel are those of the individual, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States government."

One source told Reuters the map generated an instant email flurry among U.S. officials and the White House National Security Council (NSC) angrily contacted the State Department, concerned it appeared to show Taiwan as a distinct country.

Washington complained to Taiwan's government, which in turn was angry that Tang's video had been cut.

The source called the U.S. move an over-reaction as the map was not inherently about national boundaries, but the NSC was also angry as the slide had not appeared in "dry-run" versions of the presentation before the summit, raising questions as to whether there was intentional messaging by Tang and Taiwan.

"They choked," the source said of the White House reaction.

A second source directly involved in the summit said the video booth operator acted on White House instructions. "It was clearly policy concerns," the source said, adding: "This was completely an internal overreaction."

The sources saw the move during a panel on "countering digital authoritarianism" as at odds with the summit's mission of bolstering democracy in the face of challenges from China and others. They also said it could signal that the administration's support for Taiwan was not as "rock solid" as it has repeatedly stated.

An NSC spokesman said Reuters' account of the incident was "inaccurate".

"At no time did the White House direct that Minister Tang's video feed be cut," the spokesman said in an email, also blaming it on confusion over screen-sharing and adding that the full video could be viewed on the summit web page.

Asked whether she believed the U.S. government cut the video due to the slide, Tang told Reuters in an email: "No, I do not believe that this has anything to do with the CIVICUS map in my slides, or U.S. allies in Asia for that matter."

Taiwan's foreign ministry blamed "technical problems."

It later said Tang's presentation had been provided in advance and not shown at the last minute.

"Taiwan and the United States have fully communicated on this technical issue, and the two sides have a solid mutual trust and a solid and friendly relationship," it said.

The issue comes at a highly sensitive time for U.S.-Taiwan relations, when some Biden administration critics and foreign policy experts are calling for more overt shows of support for the island, including an

	<p>end to a long-held policy of "strategic ambiguity" as to whether the United States would defend it militarily.</p> <p>Taiwan experts said they did not see the color-coding of the map as a violation of unofficial U.S. guidelines, which bar use of overt symbols of sovereignty, such as Taiwan's flag.</p> <p>"It was clearly not to distinguish sovereignty, but the degree of democratic expression," said Douglas Paal, a former unofficial U.S. ambassador to Taiwan.</p> <p>Under U.S. government guidelines as of 2020, U.S. government maps showing sovereignty by color require Taiwan to be shown with the same color as China, although exceptions can be made "when context requires that Taiwan be specifically singled out."</p> <p>Bonnie Glaser of the German Marshall Fund of the United States said the guidelines would not apply to a non-U.S. government map, "but the U.S. would likely want to avoid appearing to endorse that Taiwan is not part of China."</p> <p>"It seems to me that a decision was made at the outset that Taiwan could/should be included in the Summit for Democracy, but only in ways consistent with U.S. policy."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/12 Tragic missteps killed Calif. family on hike</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/12/tragic-death-young-california-family-hike">https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/12/tragic-death-young-california-family-hike</a>
GIST	<p>When a young family died mysteriously on a trail in California's Sierra Nevada mountains in August, authorities <a href="#">scoured</a> the area for clues. Maybe there was a gas leak from a nearby mine. Maybe the family drank water that contained toxic algae. In the end, as a new report showed, the answers were more prosaic, if just as tragic: the triple-digit temperatures and tough terrain created a fatal situation.</p> <p>Nearly eighty pages of investigative reports obtained by the <a href="#">San Francisco Chronicle</a> lay out the tragic missteps that led to the death of the young family and hold important lessons about the dangers of hiking in a grueling climate.</p> <p>The family, Ellen Chung, 31, Jonathan Gerrish, 45, along with their 1-year-old daughter, Miju, and dog, Oski, set out to hike at the Hites Cove Loop trailhead in a remote area of the Sierra Nevada national forest on 15 August. Their truck was found near the trailhead two days later and crews soon found the bodies of Gerrish and Miju – with Chung's body a little bit higher on a hillside.</p> <p>The local sheriff's office announced in October that the family died of overheating and probably dehydration. "This is an unfortunate and tragic event due to the weather," Mariposa county sheriff, Jeremy Briese, said at the time.</p> <p>The records show that Gerrish had used the AllTrails app to map out the hike and that he had hiked a portion of the same loop in May 2017. But the temperatures at the time had been much lower and the 2018 Ferguson fire hadn't yet burned out tree canopy in the area.</p> <p>Grueling mid-day temperatures and a lack of shade had moved locals in recent years to avoid the hike during the summer. But the family was new to the area: they had moved to Mariposa, in the Sierra foothills, during the pandemic and purchased numerous properties. Chung was a yoga instructor and graduate student and Gerrish was a Snapchat engineer.</p> <p>According to the report, a US Forest Service volunteer who had hiked the nearly eight-mile loop more than a dozen times told a deputy the family appeared "completely unaware of the dangers". They carried only a sippy cup and a backpack with a 2.5-liter reservoir for water, the records show.</p> <p>For Wesley Trimble, a communications and creative director with the American Hiking Society, the tragic incident serves as a reminder to be prepared when going hiking, by planning before leaving the house.</p>

He advises telling people where you are going and when to expect you back. “People often don’t think about it, but it’s a critical step: telling a neighbor or a family member that you are going to a specific location and that you’ll be in touch when you are back in an area with a cell signal,” Trimble says. And if you don’t return when you expect, give someone specific instructions, like the sheriff’s office for the county where you are hiking, if they don’t hear from you at a specified time.

Another way to plan before hitting the trail is to really look at maps and come up with a game plan, including when to turn around based on timing, even if it means not reaching a desired destination. “In the winter time frame, that might mean getting back before it’s dark, and in warm weather it might be looking at the forecast,” says Trimble.

The day of the Mariposa family’s hike, the temperatures were in the upper 70s in the morning, but rose to 109 in the afternoon when they were on the trail. It shows it’s important to consult detailed weather predictions, Trimble says – and to check the weather not just with the widget on a smartphone, but with better technology. NOAA has a [website](#) that can do pinpoint forecasting on a map, which will give a much better idea of what the forecast is, he says, because geography plays a massive role in weather.

Trimble also suggests checking in with locals about a trail – a gear shop or even a tourist office will have insight into local conditions that may not be listed on a trail-mapping app.

The American Hiking Society has a list of the [ten essential items](#) that they think everyone should have when heading out for a trek. For hikes during hot weather, it’s essential to haul enough water. “It’s hard to give people a very specific number with water,” says Trimble, though most hiking experts say about 16 ounces or a half liter per hour per person, for moderate temperatures and terrain. “If you are hiking in triple degree temperatures you will need at least a liter of water for every hour you plan to be out,” he says.

In addition, for warmer-weather hiking, it’s important to be familiar with the [symptoms of heat exhaustion and heat stroke](#). “You want to be able to pick up on if you or someone is experiencing nausea and headaches and other symptoms, because if you are hiking in hot temperatures it’s a good sign that you are probably starting to get dehydrated,” says Trimble. “Make sure everyone is drinking water consistently – by the time you are thirsty, you are already starting to become dehydrated.”

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HEADLINE	12/12 Calif. grocers seek delay new bacon law
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/12/will-new-bacon-law-begin-california-grocers-see-d/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/12/will-new-bacon-law-begin-california-grocers-see-d/</a>
GIST	<p>ELLIOTT, Iowa — A coalition of California restaurants and grocery stores has filed a lawsuit to block implementation of a new farm animal welfare law, adding to uncertainty about whether bacon and other fresh pork products will be much more expensive or in short supply in the state when the new rules take effect on New Year’s Day.</p> <p>The lawsuit is the latest step in a tumultuous three-year process of enacting rules overwhelmingly approved by voters but that remain in question even as the law is set to begin. Since voters approved Proposition 12 by a 2-to-1 ratio in November 2018, state officials have missed deadlines for releasing specific regulations covering the humane treatment of animals that provide meat for the California market.</p> <p>Most hog producers haven’t made changes to comply with the law. And now a coalition of business owners is seeking more than a two-year delay.</p> <p>“We’re saying this is not going to work,” said Nate Rose, a spokesman for the California Grocers Association.</p> <p>While groups are working to delay the measure, the state has eased the transition to the new system. It has allowed pork processed under the old rules and held in cold storage to be sold in California in 2022, which could prevent shortages for weeks or even months.</p>

As Josh Boak, who leads farm animal protection efforts at the Humane Society of the United States, put it, California residents need not fear “pork industry claims of the apocalypse.”

Put simply, the law requires that breeding pigs, egg-laying chickens and veal calves be given enough space to stand and turn around. For pigs, that means they no longer can be kept in narrow “gestation crates” and must have 24 square feet (2.23 square meters) of usable space.

Producers of eggs and veal appear able to meet the new law, but hog farmers argued the changes would be too expensive and couldn’t be carried out until the state approved final regulations for the new standards. An estimate from North Carolina State University found the new standard would cost about 15% more per animal for a farm with 1,000 breeding pigs.

The National Pork Producers Council has challenged California’s right to impose standards on businesses in other states, but so far those efforts have failed.

California is the nation’s largest market for pork, and producers in major hog states like Iowa provide more than 80% of the roughly 255 pounds (115 kilograms) that California’s restaurants and groceries use each month, according to Rabobank, a global food and agriculture financial services company.

Without that supply, it’s unclear if a state that consumes about 13% of the nation’s pork supply will have all the meat it demands. The North American Meat Institute, an industry group, said packers and processors “will do their best to serve the California market.”

“What will happen in California? I don’t know,” said Michael Formica, the general counsel for the National Pork Producers Council. “One thing we know is there will be finite supplies to sell there.”

Adding to the uncertainty is the lawsuit filed last month in Sacramento County by the California Grocers Association, California Restaurant Association, California Hispanic Chambers of Commerce, California Retailers Association and Kruse & Sons, a meat processor. The suit seeks a 28-month delay until final regulations for enforcement of the rules are officially adopted.

California’s agriculture and health departments have said the voter-backed measure didn’t give them enough time to approve final regulations. The agencies were still accepting public comments for revisions in December. That means it could be months before final rules are approved.

Given that delay, the groups claim in the lawsuit that they can’t be sure they’re complying and could be subject to penalties stipulated in the law.

“Our concern is the uncertainty,” said Rose, of the grocers association. He said a judge has scheduled a hearing for March, but the group is pushing for an earlier date.

If the law takes effect Jan. 1, it’s possible the state could avoid immediate shortages or steep price increases because the industry has about 466 pounds (211 kilograms) of pork in storage. Not all of that meat can be sent to California, of course, but when combined with new supplies from processors that meet the new standards, it should meet at least some of the demand.

If there is a disruption, it “would be significantly smoothed,” said Daniel Sumner, a professor at the University of California-Davis, who teamed with colleagues to study the price and supply implications of Proposition 12.

While an earlier study projected bacon prices soaring by up to 60% in California, a UC-Davis report estimated that the uncooked pork prices rising eventually by a more manageable 8% in California.

Massachusetts has approved a similar animal welfare law that takes effect next month, but state lawmakers are considering a one-year delay because of supply concerns.

	<p>The accuracy of the California estimates could depend on how many farmers adopt the new standards and how long the transition takes.</p> <p>Iowa farmer Ron Mardesen already meets the California standards, and for much of the year gives sows free rein to roam through large areas of his farm about 100 miles (160 kilometers) southwest of Des Moines.</p> <p>With so much room, “They’re like a bunch of big, old sisters,” he said. “You can tell they’re happy. No one is squealing or crying.”</p> <p>Chris Oliviero, general manager of Niman Ranch, a specialty meat company in Westminster, Colorado, said he hopes California’s new rules help change a system he calls “lower cost at any cost.” Although Niman charges more for its pork, he said he hopes the new California rules help limit the environmental consequences of large-scale animal agriculture.</p> <p>“There is volatility in the markets, so I understand the fears that comes with that, but I also think most large agricultural companies have shown that when they put their mind to it they’re very capable of solving complex problems,” Oliviero said.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Fraud alert: scam telephone debt collectors</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://komonews.com/news/consumer/fraud-alert-con-artists-are-pretending-to-be-debt-collectors-in-calls-and-email">https://komonews.com/news/consumer/fraud-alert-con-artists-are-pretending-to-be-debt-collectors-in-calls-and-email</a>
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Telephone con artists pretending to be debt collectors are adept at fooling or scaring people and convincing them to pay a debt they don’t owe.</p> <p>These bogus debt collectors can be quite abusive.</p> <p>Imagine being told that if you don’t pay hundreds or thousands of dollars immediately, a warrant for your arrest will be issued?</p> <p>“Debt collectors legally cannot threaten you like that,” said Amy Nofziger, who works with the <a href="#">AARP Fraud Watch Network</a>. “So, if anyone calls you and threatens you, hang up the phone and report it.”</p> <p>In the past, debt collector imposters used the phone, because it was easy to coerce payment.</p> <p>Now, however, they are running their cons via email.</p> <p>“Oftentimes, things do feel more official when they’re in writing, but don’t let their threatening words scare you,” Nofziger said. “If anyone calls you or emails you saying that you owe a debt, get information from them and then do your own research. Do not give them any of your personal or financial information over the phone or over email without checking on it yourself.”</p> <p>For consumers who ask for it in writing, a legitimate debt collector will mail or email what is known as a “validation notice” of a legitimate debt that is owed.</p> <p>Having the information in writing will make it easier to review your rights, consider the information about the alleged debt, and potentially consult other people before deciding what to do next.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 Flight attendants near breaking point</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/US/flight-attendants-nearing-breaking-point-job-manage/story?id=81625829">https://abcnews.go.com/US/flight-attendants-nearing-breaking-point-job-manage/story?id=81625829</a>

## GIST

A year and a half into the global pandemic, with the Omicron variant lurking and holiday travel looming, many flight attendants say they've reached their breaking point with unruly passengers, many of whom still refuse to respect mask mandates.

"My job is not to manage you, the one passenger that constantly needs to be reminded to put their mask on. My job is to manage getting people where they need to go as quickly and safely as possible," said Mitra Amirzadeh, a low-cost carrier flight attendant and Association of Flight Attendants member.

Dozens of videos over the past year have shown customers assaulting flight attendants, including one in which several passengers had to use duct tape to restrain an unruly man in his seat on a Frontier flight after he caused a disturbance with a flight attendant.

"Since the FAA started keeping track of reports of incidents like this on board, we've had more events in 2021 than we've had in the entire history of that record keeping in aviation," Sara Nelson, president of the AFA and a flight attendant for two decades, told ABC News. That record keeping began in 1995.

About 85% of nearly 5,000 U.S. flight attendants said they've dealt with an unruly passenger in 2021, and 17% said they've been physically assaulted, according to a survey conducted by the AFA-CWA, AFL-CIO.

Since Jan. 1, the Federal Aviation Administration has received at least 5,114 reports of unruly passengers and 3,710 reports of passengers refusing to wear a mask. Out of some 973 investigations, 239 resulted in penalties.

"Air rage has unfortunately become all too common. I've lost count of the times I've been insulted or threatened on a flight simply for doing my job," Teddy Andrews, an American Airlines flight attendant, said during testimony before Congress in September. "On this flight, my colleague on the verge of tears came to the galley after a passenger refused to wear a mask and had been giving her a hard time. He said: 'N-word,' I don't have to listen to a damn thing you say, this is a free country."

In addition to the ongoing abuse, flight attendants also fear for increased health risks to passengers -- and to themselves.

"I don't think that most passengers recognize that we're not just waiters and waitresses in the sky. Our primary role is safety," Andrews said.

In January, the FAA announced a Zero Tolerance Campaign that warned potential on-flight violators they could face fines and/or jail time.

"The truth of the matter is, every day that I go to work I'm putting my life at risk. I'm putting my family's life at risk," Amirzadeh added.

In July, the AFA urged the Department of Justice to make the policy permanent, saying that although incidents have "dropped sharply" since the FAA announced the policy "the rate remains too high."

The politicization of mask-wearing and passengers consuming too much alcohol have created additional dangers, experts told ABC News.

"Inside our airline," said Paul Hartshorn, national communications chair for the Association of Professional Flight Attendants at American Airlines, "we've never seen so many disruption reports on a daily basis. A lot of them due to mask compliance, but a lot of them due to other reasons."

"What we see going on now on the aircraft is what's happening in society," added Andrews, the flight attendant from American. "This play on masks has become so politicized and so polarized, that people are now acting out on the aircraft. We've always asked people to comply -- we ask you to wear seatbelts, we ask you to stay seated."

	<p>Attorney General Merrick Garland warned U.S. attorneys across the country to be on alert for unruly passengers on airplanes during the holiday season. After Thanksgiving, the FAA issued more than \$161,000 in fines to eight passengers accused of alcohol-related in-flight disturbances.</p> <p>"As airports continue to push alcohol," Nelson added, "it's just getting worse and around the holidays, when we have more and more people traveling and more in the spirit of that celebratory vibe."</p> <p>Travel volumes are expected to continue reaching or exceeding pre-pandemic levels through December, according to a recent report by the Transportation Security Administration. Those working on planes said they're expecting full flights.</p> <p>"The holiday season will be great but not without challenges as the mask mandates will remain in place," Andrews said. "As the passenger count increases, so might the incidence of air rage."</p> <p>"All we want to do," Andrews added, "is come to work and do our job."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Climate extremes batter Australia</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/11/world/australia/flooding-fire-climate-australia.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/11/world/australia/flooding-fire-climate-australia.html</a>
GIST	<p>WEE WAA, Australia — Two years ago, the fields outside Christina Southwell's family home near the cotton capital of Australia looked like a dusty, brown desert as drought-fueled wildfires burned to the north and south.</p> <p>Last week, after record-breaking rains, muddy floodwaters surrounded her, along with the stench of rotting crops. She had been trapped for days with just her cat, and still didn't know when the sludge would recede.</p> <p>"It seems to take for bloody ever to go away," she said, watching a boat carry food into the town of Wee Waa. "All it leaves behind is this stink, and it's just going to get worse."</p> <p>Life on the land has always been hard in Australia, but the past few years have delivered one extreme after another, demanding new levels of resilience and pointing to the rising costs of a warming planet. For many Australians, moderate weather — a pleasant summer, a year without a state of emergency — increasingly feels like a luxury.</p> <p>The <a href="#">Black Summer bush fires</a> of 2019 and 2020 were the worst in Australia's recorded history. This year, many of the same areas that suffered through those epic blazes endured the wettest, coldest November since at least 1900. Hundreds of people, across several states, have been forced to evacuate. Many more, like Ms. Southwell, are stranded on floodplain islands with no way to leave except by boat or helicopter, possibly until after Christmas.</p> <p>And with a second year of the weather phenomenon known as <a href="#">La Niña</a> in full swing, meteorologists are predicting even more flooding for Australia's east coast, adding to the stress from the pandemic, not to mention from a recent <a href="#">rural mouse plague of biblical proportions</a>.</p> <p>"It feels constant," said Brett Dickinson, 58, a wheat farmer who lives not far from Ms. Southwell in northwest New South Wales, about a six-hour drive from Sydney. "We're constantly battling all the elements — and the animals too."</p> <p>There's a tendency to think of such extremes as "natural disasters" or "acts of God" that come and go with news reports. But Australia's nightmares of nature ebb and flow. Its droughts and floods, though weather opposites, are driven by the same forces — some of them timeless, others newer and caused by humans.</p> <p>Andy Pitman, director of the ARC Center of Excellence for Climate Extremes at the University of New South Wales, said the ups and downs of weather had been severe for millennia on the Australian</p>



landmass, which is as large as the continental United States and surrounded by powerful climate-driving oceans, from the tropical South Pacific to the colder Southern Ocean off Antarctica.

As a consequence, the El Niño and La Niña patterns tend to hit Australia harder than they do other places, with harsh droughts that end with major floods. Some scientists even suggest that the way marsupials reproduce, with the ability to put active [pregnancies on pause](#), shows that the El Niño-La Niña cycle has been around long enough for flora and fauna to adapt.

On top of that already-intense variability, Professor Pitman said, are now two additional complicating factors: “climate change and human decisions around building things.”

Both make fires and floods more damaging.

“A small change in climate coupled with a small change in landscapes can have a large impact on flood characteristics,” Professor Pitman said.

The results are already visible in government budgets. The cost of climate disasters in Australia has [more than doubled since the 1970s](#).

Ron Campbell, the mayor of Narrabri Shire, which includes Wee Waa, said his area was still waiting for government payments to offset damage from past catastrophes. He wondered when governments would stop paying for infrastructure repairs after every emergency.

“The costs are just enormous, not just here but at all the other places in similar circumstances,” he said.

More viscerally, the impact of a “supercharged climate” is drawn on the land itself. Across the vast tracts of farmland and small towns between Melbourne and Sydney where much of the country’s food, cattle, wine — and coal — are produced, the effects of fire, drought and flood coexist.

Even in areas that did not burst into flames, the heat waves and lack of rainfall that preceded the bush fires killed as much as 60 percent of the trees in some places. Cattle farmers culled so much of their herds during the drought that beef prices have risen more than 50 percent as they rush to restock paddocks nourished (nearly to death) by heavy rain.

Bryce Guest, a helicopter pilot in Narrabri, once watched the dust bowls grow from above. Then came “just a monstrous amount of rain,” he said, and new kind of job: flights to mechanical pumps pushing water from fields to irrigation dams in a last-ditch effort to preserve crops that had been heading for a record harvest.

On one recent flight, he pointed to mountains of stored grain — worth six figures, at least — that were ruined by the rains, with heavy equipment trapped and rusting next to it. Further inland, a home surrounded by levees had become a small island accessible only by boat or copter.

“Australia is all about water — everything revolves around it,” he said. “Where you put your home, your stock. Everything.”

The flood plains in what is known as the Murray-Darling basin stretch out for hundreds of miles, not unlike the land at the mouth of the Mississippi River. The territory is so flat that towns can be cut off with roads flooded by less than an inch of additional rain.

That happened a few weeks ago in Bedgerabong, a few hundred miles south of Narrabri. On a recent afternoon, a couple of teachers were being driven out of town in a hulking fire truck — equipment for one disaster often serves another. Across a flooded road behind them, three other teachers had decided to camp out so they could provide some consistency for children who had already been kept out of school for months by pandemic lockdowns.

Paul Faulkner, 55, the principal of the school (total enrollment: 42), said that many parents craved social connection for their children. The Red Cross has sent in booklets for those struggling with stress and anxiety.

“Covid has kept everyone from their families,” he said. “This just isolates them even more.”

He admitted that there were a few things they did not discuss; Santa, for one. The town is expected to be cut off until after the holidays as the waters that rose with surging rains over a few days take weeks to drain and fade.

In Wee Waa, where the water has started to recede, supplies and people flowed in and out last week by helicopter and in a small boat piloted by volunteers.

Still, there were shortages everywhere — mostly of people. In a community of around 2,000 people, half of the teachers at the local public school couldn’t make it to work.

At the town’s only pharmacy, Tien On, the owner, struggled with a short-handed staff to keep up with requests. He was especially concerned about delayed drug deliveries by helicopter for patients with mental health medications.

Ms. Southwell, 69, was better prepared than most. She spent 25 years volunteering with emergency services and has been teaching first aid for decades. After a quick trip into Wee Waa by boat, she returned to her home with groceries and patience, checking a shed for the stray cats she feeds and discovering that only one of her chickens appeared to have drowned.

She said she wasn’t sure how much climate change could be blamed for the floods; her father had put their house on higher stilts because they knew the waters would rise on occasion.

All she knew was that more extreme weather and severe challenges to the community would be coming their way.

“The worst part of it is the waiting,” she said. “And the cleanup.”

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## Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	12/13 Report: Colombia police behind ‘massacre’
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/13/colombia-police-massacre-2020/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/13/colombia-police-massacre-2020/</a>
GIST	<p>BOGOTÁ, Colombia — Colombia’s national police were responsible for the deaths of 11 people during two days of protests against police brutality last year, according to an independent investigation requested by the mayor of Bogotá and supported by the United Nations.</p> <p>The killings amounted to a “massacre,” former national ombudsman Carlos Negret wrote in a scathing 177-page report released Monday. A copy of the document was provided to The Washington Post in advance of its release.</p> <p>Negret and a team of researchers blamed the deaths on an institutional failure to instruct officers not to use firearms against the crowds, and on a response that prioritized the protection of police stations over the lives of officers and protesters. They described the violence as “one of the most serious episodes of violations against human rights in the history of the city of Bogotá.”</p> <p>Bogotá Mayor Claudia López, who requested the investigation into the police response to the protests, said she deserved a share of the blame.</p>

“Who should assume political responsibility? Me, to begin with. But also the Police and the president of the Republic,” López said in a response included in the report. “That’s what I’ve asked for from day one. From that day it was obvious that what happened was police abuse and a state crime.”

The investigation was funded and supported by the U.N. Development Program.

The violence erupted on Sept. 9, 2020, as thousands of people poured onto the streets of Bogotá and vandalized police stations to protest the death of Javier Ordóñez. The middle-aged father of two had been detained for breaking Bogotá’s covid-19 lockdown.

A video shared on social media on Sept. 9 showed him pinned to the ground, pleading for relief as two police officers shocked him repeatedly with a stun gun. “Please,” he begged. “No more.” He later died of a blow to the head suffered while in police custody.

An estimated 12,000 people took to the streets on Sept. 9 and 10 to protest. Fourteen died, 11 of them at the hands of the police. Seventy-five more suffered gunshot wounds, and hundreds of civilians and police officers were injured. Seventy-six police stations were damaged or destroyed.

At least two of the victims were killed by armed individuals dressed in civilian clothing, the investigators said. It remains unclear whether the armed people were civilians or police in plainclothes.

A spokesman for the director of Colombia’s national police said the fatal violence following the death of Ordóñez “should have never happened.” He said a judicial process was underway in the attorney general’s office to prosecute any officers who committed crimes.

The spokesman, who spoke under the condition of anonymity according to rules set by the police, said records show that on Sept. 10, officers were given specific instructions to guarantee respect for human rights and the proper use of force. He also pointed to recent reforms, including the designation of a human rights directorate within the national police.

“Clearly, there were violations of human rights and crimes committed by the police, but they do not correspond to a doctrine ... rather to individual facts,” the spokesman said. “For that reason, they must be clarified by the competent authorities.”

Officials and human rights groups in the United States and around the world are increasingly demanding accountability from a Colombian police force long accused of using excessive force against civilians.

Colombia’s national police, which reports directly to the Ministry of Defense, is a militarized force that fought alongside the U.S.-funded Colombian army in the country’s half-century civil conflict against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC. During several weeks of protests across Colombia this year, at least 20 people appeared to have been killed by the police, according to Human Rights Watch.

Colombia’s specialized riot police, known as the ESMAD, are prohibited from carrying firearms. But other police forces that respond to demonstrations — including those following the death of Ordóñez — are armed with such weapons.

In Senate foreign appropriations for 2022, U.S. lawmakers have proposed an outright ban on any assistance to the Colombian riot police. They have also proposed withholding 5 percent of \$160 million in anti-narcotics funding to Colombia unless the U.S. secretary of state certifies that riot police are being held accountable for excessive use of force against peaceful protesters.

Negret and the researchers highlight Colombia’s failure to promptly investigate and prosecute allegations of police abuse from the September 2020 protests. More than a year after the violence, they found, fewer than 44 percent of criminal cases connected to the protests and brought before the attorney general’s office are being investigated. Of the 427 active investigations, only 2.5 percent have reached the trial phase.

The illegal use of force by police was widespread, the investigators said. They documented cases of torture and cruel, inhumane treatment prohibited by the inter-American human rights system. Protesters and bystanders were subjected to mass and arbitrary detentions and gender-based violence, they said. Detainees were robbed or denied medical attention while in police custody.

Those killed were mostly poor, young people from working-class neighborhoods, whose families had come to Bogotá from other regions in search of economic opportunity, investigators noted.

“The result of this tragedy shows that there is a criminalization of poverty by the public force,” Negret wrote.

The investigators acknowledged that police officers suffered serious beatings and attacks from protesters throwing sticks and stones. But they said the use of force employed by police against the protesters could not be justified as self-defense. Officers used their weapons as “an offensive measure to indiscriminately deter” those vandalizing police stations and those who demonstrated peacefully, they found.

Political leaders in Colombia have tried to link demonstrators last year and this year to illegal armed forces and organized criminal groups. Last year, President Iván Duque blamed “urban terrorist structures” seeking to “take advantage of the circumstances and generate chaos.”

These messages were not based on facts, the investigators said, and might have contributed to a belief that police officers’ use of firearms was part of a “an offensive action to attack a legitimate target in the fight against terrorism.”

Most of the thousands of police officers deployed on Sept. 9 and 10 were not members of the specialized riot police. Many of those tasked with protecting police stations were inexperienced in crowd disturbance situations, according to the report. One senior police official interviewed by the report’s authors acknowledged a “lack of foresight” once authorities learned of Ordóñez’s killing.

At one point, police officials ordered the deployment of 40 female officers to control protests near the police station where Ordóñez was killed, believing it less likely that protesters “would attack policewomen,” according to people interviewed for the report.

López, the mayor, and the investigators criticized police commanders for not ordering officers to leave the scene as police stations were being destroyed.

“It cannot be that they did all of this to defend some” stations, López wrote. “How could they stay to defend a piece of cement with blood and fire?”

Some who were injured on Sept. 9 and 10 were not even participating in the protests. One 19-year-old man happened to be walking by demonstrations in the Bochica Sur neighborhood of Bogotá after leaving a soccer game on Sept 10. As he ran away from the clashes, he told investigators, two police officers on motorcycles chased him to a parking lot, where one officer shot him in the arm.

The man was later detained, tortured and robbed at a police station, he said in the report. When he asked to be taken to a hospital for treatment, he said, an officer told him, “Don’t be a girl.”

The young man said he has always dreamed of becoming a police officer. That goal hasn’t changed, he said.

But more than a year later, the bullet is still lodged in his arm.

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HEADLINE	12/12 Texas shooting at vigil; 1 dead, 14 hurt
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/US/dead-14-injured-shooting-baytown-texas-officials/story?id=81715666">https://abcnews.go.com/US/dead-14-injured-shooting-baytown-texas-officials/story?id=81715666</a>

GIST	<p>One person is dead and 14 are injured -- three critically -- after a shooting in Baytown, Texas, officials said.</p> <p>A gunman opened fire on a crowd participating in a celebration of life in the area, the Harris County Sheriff's Office confirmed to ABC's Texas station, KTRK.</p> <p><a href="#">KTRK</a> spoke to HCSO's sergeant, who said a mother was holding a vigil for her son who was killed at his home a couple weeks ago, when an unknown suspect drove down the road shooting rounds into the crowd.</p> <p>"@HCSOTexas units responded to 1403 N Market Loop. Preliminary info: a large crowd gathered for a celebration of life. A vehicle approached and someone from the vehicle began shooting into the crowd. At least 8 people sustained injuries; 7 are non-fatal, but one has been," Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez tweeted.</p> <p>"Update to shooting on N. Market Loop: told the number of wounded individuals is now up to 14; 1 has been pronounced deceased, 3 being taken by Lifeflight in critical condition, and the remaining ones are said to have non/fatal injuries," he later added.</p> <p><a href="#">Return to Top</a></p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Chicago smash-grab: \$2M watches stolen</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://cwbcchicago.com/2021/12/watches-worth-2-million-taken-in-downtown-smash-and-grab-as-retail-raiders-strike-again-and-again.html">https://cwbcchicago.com/2021/12/watches-worth-2-million-taken-in-downtown-smash-and-grab-as-retail-raiders-strike-again-and-again.html</a>
GIST	<p>This story was supposed to be about how shoplifting raiders stole thousands of dollars in merchandise from the North Face store on Michigan Avenue two days in a row.</p> <p>Not any more.</p> <p>Chicago police are investigating after a smash-and-grab team stole an estimated \$2 million worth of wristwatches from a luxury car dealership near the Mag Mile on Saturday afternoon. Less than an hour earlier, at least six thieves mobbed an Oak Street retailer and escaped with over \$20,000 worth of coats.</p> <p>And it all happened as the Chicago Police Department supposedly had a special plan and extra resources in the area to make sure the downtown retail strips “remained safe.”</p> <p>Shortly after noon on Saturday, two men entered the Bentley, Lamborghini, and Rolls-Royce dealership at 834 North Rush Street. One of the men used a hammer to smash a display case containing extremely expensive watches.</p> <p>How expensive? According to initial information, the timepieces are Richard Mille brand — watches advertised as “a racing machine on the wrist.” They retail for hundreds and hundreds of thousands, sometimes millions, of dollars. Each.</p> <p>The thieves, described as two Black males wearing black clothing, reportedly snagged several of them from the car dealer’s display and then escaped in a vehicle that was waiting on nearby Delaware Place.</p> <p>Earlier on Saturday, a group of between six and nine men wearing ski masks stormed Moose Knuckles, 54 East Walton, and escaped with over \$20,000 worth of high-end winter coats. One of the offenders punched an employee on the way out. The crew escaped in a black Dodge Charger and a silver Dodge Durango, both of which are stolen.</p> <p>On Friday afternoon, two men snagged more than \$1,000 worth of merchandise from Nike, 669 North Michigan. The heist seems almost quaint compared to other thefts in the area.</p>

	<p>Later, around 5:30 p.m., two offenders stole about \$3,000 worth of coats from North Face, 875 North Michigan. The same store lost about \$10,000 in products to a two-man theft team on Thursday afternoon, according to a CPD statement.</p> <p>The North Face thieves used the same gray 2004 Honda Accord on both days. On Thursday, the suspects were described as two Black men in their 20s, one of whom wore a Rugrats letterman-style jacket and another who wore a cream-colored hoodie.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/12 Cities breaking all-time homicide records</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/12/us/homicides-major-cities-increase-end-of-year-2021/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/12/us/homicides-major-cities-increase-end-of-year-2021/index.html</a>
GIST	<p><b>Austin, Texas (CNN)</b>One of the fastest-growing cities in the country, the capital of Texas is nearing the end of its deadliest year on record in 2021 as cities nationwide are experiencing a rise in homicides and gun violence incidents that began last year when the pandemic tightened its grip on the US.</p> <p>Fueled by what both authorities and community leaders say is the easy access to guns, Austin has recorded 88 homicides so far this year, shattering the previous high of 59 in 1984.</p> <p>Chris Harris, a member of the <a href="#">Austin Justice Coalition</a>, a community-led organization addressing criminal justice reform as well as economic and social justice, said most of the violent incidents that occur in the city involve people "who know each other."</p> <p>"If it's two people who know each other, clearly there is some contact that has risen to a point now that is being resolved violently instead of being resolved peacefully," Harris said.</p> <p><a href="#">Austin Police Chief Joseph Chacon</a> called the increase in violent crime "disappointing," especially for a historically safe community.</p> <p>"When you see the numbers spike like this and we're trying to figure out exactly why that's happening," Chacon said, "there's no clear-cut answer. We haven't found that one trend that we can really pin this on."</p> <p>Austin is part of a worrying trend facing the nation. More than two-thirds of the country's most populous cities have seen more homicides in 2021 than last year, a continuation of the troubling increase in homicides that began at the onset of the pandemic in 2020, according to a CNN analysis of over 40 major cities .</p> <p>The rise in violent crime is an epidemic that is happening "all across the country," said <a href="#">Thomas Abt, a senior fellow at the Council on Criminal Justice</a>, and a result of three major factors: the impact of Covid-19 on communities and first responders, the fallout of the social unrest after <a href="#">the murder of George Floyd</a>, and the surge in gun sales since the start of the pandemic.</p> <p>At least nine major cities have broken their previous annual homicide records with about three weeks left to go in 2021. There have been 513 homicides this year in Philadelphia, higher than the previous total of 503 in 1990. There have been 230 homicides in Indianapolis, breaking the previous record of 215 set just last year.</p> <p>These increases are not isolated to any particular region of the country. Other cities with record homicide totals include Louisville, Kentucky; Columbus, Ohio; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Tucson, Arizona; Rochester, New York; and Portland, Oregon. Milwaukee, Minneapolis and Nashville are also on pace to reach record homicide numbers by the end of the year.</p> <p>Los Angeles recorded 352 homicides so far this year, and Chicago has seen 756, with year-to-date increases of 12% and 4% respectively. In Houston, homicides are up 18% from 2020. But figures released by municipal police departments don't include totals from other law enforcement agencies that operate within the same city, so these figures are likely to be an undercount.</p>

While one-year increases don't always portend a significant spike in crime, almost all the largest cities in the United States have seen an increase in homicides from 2019, sustaining a sharp rise that began last year.

### **Spike in violent crime is the result of 'perfect storm'**

According to the [2020 Uniform Crime Report](#) from the FBI, homicides rose 30% from 2019 to 2020, the largest single-year increase the agency has recorded since it began tracking these crimes in the 1960s.

There were more than 21,500 murders last year, a total not seen since the mid 1990s. But the murder rate in 2020 was about 6.5 per 100,000 people, about 40% below what it was in the 1980s and 1990s, when homicides peaked in the United States.

"The pandemic, like community gun violence, concentrates among the poorest and most disenfranchised people," Abt said. "So those communities are doubly impacted, not only by Covid-19, but by gun violence."

At the same time, the institutions that are responsible for responding to violence, including police and community organizations, were also placed under stress and pressure, Abt added, referring to the phenomenon as a "perfect storm."

Abt said the second factor is the fallout of the social unrest following the murder of Floyd by [former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin](#).

"We're seeing police pulling back in some cities from some of their discretionary law enforcement activities and we're also seeing communities pulling back from their ongoing collaboration and cooperation with police," he said. "When you have that divide between cops and communities, violence tends to go up."

The final factor experts say is causing violent crime to go up is a "huge surge in gun sales that began at the beginning of the pandemic and has not slowed down," he said.

A small but significant number of these guns are "ending up in the wrong hands and being used in gun crimes," Abt added.

[Fayetteville, North Carolina, Police Chief Gina Hawkins](#) said homicides in her city are "up high" right now from 23 homicides last year to 32 this year through the end of September, representing a 39% increase, according to the city's third-quarter crime statistics.

"People are quickly pulling a gun out and without thought of repercussions and without the thought that you are truly ending a life," Hawkins said.

Hawkins said another issue is social media "extremists" who need access to mental health resources.

"When you don't have anyone to talk to you off a cliff or you are so geared in social media, that plays another role," she said.

Experts have recommended looking into community-based approaches to reduce violent crime.

"Police need to be at the table and police are part of the solution, but they are not the whole solution," Abt said. "You need community-based organizations and law enforcement agencies working together."

Shooting incidents -- both fatal and non-fatal -- have increased in nearly all major US cities where data was available, according to a CNN analysis. Guns were the most used weapon in every city where information was published detailing the method of homicide.



According to the FBI report, the number of homicides last year began to escalate during the summer months, peaking in June and July and remaining at high levels after that. Capturing a full picture of homicide in the United States is nearly impossible -- the UCR report is the most comprehensive data set available, but participation by law enforcement agencies is voluntary.

Last year, only 85% of the country's more than 18,000 agencies submitted their data to the FBI. The 2021 UCR report will likely not publish until late next year.

While experts say the reasons for the rise in homicides are varied, murders are increasingly carried out by guns. The increase in gun violence was underscored in the 2020 UCR Report, which stated that about 77% of reported murders in 2020 were committed with a gun, up from 74% in 2019. There is no federal database of gun sales, but other independent surveys have found that [gun sales have soared during the Covid-19 pandemic](#).

#### [Homicides in 22 US cities continue to rise in 2021 but at a slower pace, report says](#)

With just three weeks remaining in 2021, it seems almost certain that there will be more murders this year than last. However, the rate of increase in homicides does appear to be slowing.

A quarterly report published in [November](#) by the Council on Criminal Justice, which studied homicides in 22 cities during the first nine months of this year, showed the number of murders was 4% greater than the same period in 2020. In the first three quarters of 2020, the number of homicides in the same 22 cities rose by 36% over the same time frame in 2019, according to the report.

Data from consulting company [AH Datalytics](#), which tracks year-to-date homicides across dozens of major US cities, shows a 7.5% increase in homicides so far between 2021 and 2020, down from the 10% increase observed over the summer and a further a reduction from the 30% increase observed in 2020.

#### **A renewed focus on conflict resolution in Austin**

The homicide rate in Austin peaked in 1982, and has gradually declined since then. It remained remarkably steady even as the city's population more than doubled, hovering between three and five homicides per 100,000 people.

In the 1980s, Austin's homicide rate stood at almost 16 per 100,000 residents, before slowly declining in the late 90s and early 2000s. This year, however, the homicide rate has jumped up to 8.5, close to the rates seen in the late 80s and early 90s.

Harris, of the Austin Justice Coalition, said the accessibility of guns in Texas and states across the country has resulted in more deadly encounters. "Maybe if we were sending other types of resources other than just police into our communities, we would be having different outcomes," Harris told CNN.

Austin's police department has not published how many of these homicides were committed with a gun, but according to the [Gun Violence Archive](#), a nonprofit organization that tracks gun-related violence in the United States, there have been 82 gun deaths in the city so far this year.

Chacon said the violence is likely the result of widespread anxiety and uncertainty due to the pandemic as well as the proliferation of illegally owned weapons on the street, which makes it "a lot easier to commit very serious offenses."

The Austin Police Department is working to combat violent crime by using its real-time crime center to connect on-duty officers with databases at police headquarters as well as the city's new office of violence prevention.

Police officers and community advocates in Austin are putting a renewed focus on conflict resolution to combat crime.

"We really need to invest in more resources, and our organization is very much focused on trying to give more people tools and access to conflict resolution to help prevent the violence before it occurs," Harris said.

### **Illegal guns pose major challenge for law enforcement**

Baltimore was one of the few major cities that saw a decrease in homicides between 2019 and 2020, after a record-setting 348 in 2019. However, homicides rose from 2020 to this year, with a year-to-date total of 320 killings.

"While many of these offenders might be tied to the drug trade, the shootings and homicides are not always drug related. It's conflict and it's retaliation from previous conflicts and bad acts," said [Baltimore Police Commissioner Michael Harrison](#), who is also the president of the board of the [Police Executive Research Forum](#).

Harrison said that chiefs across the country have been saying the "lack of consequences and the lack of fear of any consequences" in the climate as a result of the pandemic is a significant factor in the increase in violence, as well as the disruption of the criminal justice system.

"Two-thirds of the criminal justice system were not operating at full capacity like policing was and when you put that all together, here we are again seeing a rise in crime," he said.

For 18 months, grand juries as well as state and federal trials were largely halted, Harrison said, and the system is just now "resuming deploying consequences for people who committed these bad acts."

The city's population has been in a steady decline for decades, down 20% from 735,632 residents in 1990. The homicide rate jumped in 2015 after two decades of steady, year-over-year reductions in murders -- and has remained elevated ever since. As of November 30, there have been 921 fatal and non-fatal shootings in the city this year.

"We have a problem that is much bigger than Baltimore city," [Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott](#) told CNN. "We still have the historical things that are happening -- the guns, the drugs, the gangs, the money, but so many more people are dying from small, interpersonal disputes."

The Baltimore Police Department is on pace to recover as many guns as it did in 2020 with 1,302 this year after seizing 1,334 guns last year, according to Harrison.

But a new and daunting challenge is locating and seizing [privately made 'ghost guns'](#), which are not branded with a serial number. Ghost guns are growing in popularity, and they are being used in more shootings and murders, Harrison said.

The department recovered only nine ghost guns in 2018 -- but as of late November this year, officers recovered 294, according to Harrison.

"People can order them online in parts and some of them at home," he said. "All you need is a credit card and enough money to buy it and its untraceable. So, it's becoming more difficult for law enforcement to really hold people accountable for having and using these guns until the crime is committed."

Without a serial number, it's a major challenge for law enforcement to find the original owner or purchaser of the ghost gun that can help police trace the ballistics to other possible crimes, Harrison said.

But the department is working with its partners at the [Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives \(ATF\)](#) and has assigned detectives to ATF to track both guns and ghost guns. The city is also the first to partner with [Everytown for Gun Safety](#) -- a nonprofit focused on preventing gun violence -- to launch a [Gun Trafficking Intelligence Platform](#) to track the origin of illegal guns on the street, according to Harrison.

	<p>Baltimore is launching its <a href="#">Group Violence Reduction Strategy</a> in partnership with the police department and the state attorney's office, aiming to address the root causes of violence "by focusing resources on individuals identified as being at the highest acute risk of involvement in gun violence," according to the city's website.</p> <p>The strategy is designed to provide offenders with a pathway "away from a life of crime" and one that includes helping them with their specific needs, such as education, mental illness, crime, addiction and housing, according to Harrison.</p> <p>"If they are not addressed, we may stop one thing but we're allowing someone else to continue the cycle of violence," Harrison said.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Deadly confrontation near UK royal palace</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/man-killed-shooting-involving-police-uk-royal-palace-81695495">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/man-killed-shooting-involving-police-uk-royal-palace-81695495</a>
GIST	<p>LONDON -- British police say a man was shot dead during a confrontation with firearms officers on Saturday near the Kensington Palace royal residence in London.</p> <p>The Metropolitan Police force said officers were called to reports that a man with a firearm had entered a bank and bookmakers in the Kensington area of west London.</p> <p>He fled in a vehicle, which was stopped by officers nearby in a wealthy area that is home to several embassies and the palace, which is the official London residence of Prince William, his wife Kate and their three children. It is also home to several other members of the royal family.</p> <p>The force said "shots were fired and a man sustained gunshot wounds." He was pronounced dead at the scene.</p> <p>Police say the incident is not being treated as terrorism.</p> <p>The force said the police standards body has been called in, as is usual for shootings involving the police.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Rioters social media posts incriminate</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory/capitol-rioters-social-media-posts-influencing-sentencings-81691167">https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory/capitol-rioters-social-media-posts-influencing-sentencings-81691167</a>
GIST	<p>For many rioters who stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, self-incriminating messages, photos and videos that they broadcast on social media before, during and after the insurrection are influencing even their criminal sentences.</p> <p>Earlier this month, U.S. District Judge Amy Jackson read aloud some of Russell Peterson's posts about the riot before she sentenced the Pennsylvania man to 30 days imprisonment. "Overall I had fun lol," Peterson posted on Facebook.</p> <p>The judge told Peterson that his posts made it "extraordinarily difficult" for her to show him leniency.</p> <p>"The 'lol' particularly stuck in my craw because, as I hope you've come to understand, nothing about January 6th was funny," Jackson added. "No one locked in a room, cowering under a table for hours, was laughing."</p> <p>Among the biggest takeaways so far from the Justice Department's prosecution of the insurrection is how large a role social media has played, with much of the most damning evidence coming from rioters' own words and videos.</p>

FBI agents have identified scores of rioters from public posts and records subpoenaed from social media platforms. Prosecutors use the posts to build cases. Judge now are citing defendants' words and images as factors weighing in favor of tougher sentences.

As of Friday, more than 50 people have been sentenced for federal crimes related to the insurrection. In at least 28 of those cases, prosecutors factored a defendant's social media posts into their requests for stricter sentences, according to an Associated Press review of court records.

Many rioters used social media to celebrate the violence or spew hateful rhetoric. Others used it to spread misinformation, promote baseless conspiracy theories or play down their actions. Prosecutors also have accused a few defendants of trying to destroy evidence by deleting posts.

Approximately 700 people have been charged with federal crimes related to the riot. About 150 of them have pleaded guilty. More than 20 defendants have been sentenced to jail or prison terms or to time already served behind bars. Over a dozen others received home confinement sentences.

Rioters' statements, in person or on social media, aren't the only consideration for prosecutors or judges. Justice Department sentencing memos say defendants also should be judged by whether they engaged in any violence or damaged property, whether they destroyed evidence, how long they spent inside the Capitol, where they went inside the building and whether they have shown sincere remorse.

Prosecutors recommended probation for Indiana hair salon owner Dona Sue Bissey, but Judge Tanya Chutkan sentenced her to two weeks in jail for her participation in the riot. The judge noted that Bissey posted a screenshot of a Twitter post that read, "This is the First time the U.S. Capitol had been breached since it was attacked by the British in 1814."

"When Ms. Bissey got home, she was not struck with remorse or regret for what she had done," Chutkan said. "She is celebrating and bragging about her participation in what amounted to an attempted overthrow of the government."

FBI agents obtained a search warrant for Andrew Ryan Bennett's Facebook account after getting a tip that the Maryland man live-streamed video from inside the Capitol. Two days before the riot, Bennett posted a Facebook message that said, "You better be ready chaos is coming and I will be in DC on 1/6/2021 fighting for my freedom!."

Judge James Boasberg singled out that post as an "aggravating" factor weighing in favor of house arrest instead of a fully probationary sentence.

"The cornerstone of our democratic republic is the peaceful transfer of power after elections," the judge told Bennett. "What you and others did on January 6th was nothing less than an attempt to undermine that system of government."

Senior Judge Reggie Walton noted that Lori Ann Vinson publicly expressed pride in her actions at the Capitol during television news interviews and on Facebook.

"I understand that sometimes emotions get in the way and people do and say stupid things, because it was ridiculous what was said. But does that justify me giving a prison sentence or a jail sentence? That's a hard question for me to ask," Walton said.

Prosecutors asked for a one-month jail sentence for Vinson, but the judge sentenced the Kentucky nurse to five years of probation and ordered her to pay a \$5,000 fine and perform 120 hours of community service.

In the case of Felipe Marquez, the judge found social media posts belied serious mental health issues that needed treatment rather than incarceration. Marquez recorded cellphone videos of himself with other rioters inside the office of Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore. Back at home in Florida, Marquez posted a YouTube

video in which he rapped about his riot experience to the tune of Shaggy's "It Wasn't Me." with lyrics that included, "We even fist-bumped police," and "We were taking selfies."

In the video, Marquez wore a T-shirt that said, "Property of FBI."

Prosecutors had recommended a four-month jail sentence, but U.S. District Judge Rudolph Contreras sentenced him instead to three months of home confinement with mental-health treatment, followed by probation. "I do think you have some serious issues you need to address. That played a large role in my sentencing decision," he said.

Judge Jackson gave Andrew Wrigley a history lesson before she sentenced the Pennsylvania man to 18 months of probation. Wrigley posted a photo on social media of him holding a 1776 flag during the riot. The judge said the gesture didn't honor the nation's founders.

"The point of 1776 was to let the people decide who would rule them. But the point of the attack on the Capitol was to stop that from happening," Jackson said. "The point of the attack on the Capitol was to subvert democracy, to substitute the will of the people with the will of the mob."

Videos captured New Jersey gym owner Scott Fairlamb punching a police officer outside the Capitol. His Facebook and Instagram posts showed he was prepared to commit violence in Washington, D.C., and had no remorse for his actions, prosecutors said.

Senior Judge Royce Lamberth said other rioters in Fairlamb's position would be "well advised" to join him in pleading guilty.

"You couldn't have beat this if you went to trial on the evidence that I saw," Lamberth said before sentencing Fairlamb to 41 months in prison.

But it worked to the advantage of one. Virginia charter boat captain Jacob Hiles likely avoided a stricter sentence by posting videos and photos of him and his cousin at the Capitol. A day after the riot, Hiles received a private Facebook message from a Capitol police officer who said he agreed with Hiles' "political stance" and encouraged him to delete his incriminating posts, according to prosecutors.

The officer, Michael Angelo Riley, deleted his communications with Hiles, but investigators recovered the messages from Hiles' Facebook account, prosecutors said. Riley was indicted in October on obstruction charges.

On Monday, Jackson sentenced Hiles to two years of probation. Prosecutors said the case against Riley may have been impossible without Hiles' cooperation.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/12 Haiti's leader was about to name names</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/12/world/jovenel-moise-haiti-president-drug-traffickers.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=World%20News">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/12/world/jovenel-moise-haiti-president-drug-traffickers.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=World%20News</a>
GIST	<p>PORT-AU-PRINCE — President Jovenel Moïse of Haiti was about to name names.</p> <p>Before being assassinated in July, he had been working on a list of powerful politicians and businesspeople involved in Haiti's drug trade, with the intention of handing over the dossier to the American government, according to four senior Haitian advisers and officials tasked with drafting the document.</p> <p>The president had ordered the officials to spare no one, not even the power brokers who had helped propel him into office, they said — one of several moves against suspected drug traffickers that could explain a motive for the assassination.</p>

When gunmen burst into Mr. Moïse's residence and killed him in his bedroom, his wife, Martine Moïse — who had also been shot and lay bleeding on the floor, pretending to be dead — described how they stayed to search the room, hurriedly digging through his files.

“That's it,” they finally declared to one another before fleeing, she told The New York Times in her first interview after the assassination, adding that she did not know what the gunmen had taken.

Investigators arrived at the crime scene to find Mr. Moïse's home office ransacked, papers strewn everywhere. In interrogations, some of the captured hit men confessed that retrieving the list Mr. Moïse had been working on — with the names of suspected drug traffickers — was a top priority, according to three senior Haitian officials with knowledge of the investigation.

The document was part of a broader series of clashes Mr. Moïse had with powerful political and business figures, some suspected of narcotics and arms trafficking. Mr. Moïse had known several of them for years, and they felt betrayed by his turn against them, his aides say.

In the months before his death, Mr. Moïse took steps to clean up Haiti's customs department, nationalize a seaport with a history of smuggling, destroy an airstrip used by drug traffickers and investigate the lucrative eel trade, which has recently been identified as a conduit for money laundering.

The Times interviewed more than 70 people and traveled to eight of Haiti's 10 departments, or states, to interview politicians, Mr. Moïse's childhood friends, police officers, fishermen and participants in the drug trade to understand what happened in the last seven months of the president's life that may have contributed to his death. Many of them now fear for their lives as well.

“I would be a fool to think that narco-trafficking and arms trafficking didn't play a role in the assassination,” said Daniel Foote, who served as the U.S. special envoy to Haiti before stepping down last month. “Anyone who understands Haiti's politics or economics understands this.”

A central figure on Mr. Moïse's list was Charles “Kiko” Saint-Rémy, two of the Haitian officials tasked with helping draft the dossier said. Mr. Saint-Rémy, a Haitian businessman, has long been suspected by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration of involvement in the drug trade. Notably, he is also the brother-in-law of former President Michel Martelly, who lifted Mr. Moïse out of political obscurity and tapped him to be his successor.

Mr. Martelly, who is considering another run for the presidency, and Mr. Saint-Rémy were hugely influential in Mr. Moïse's government, with a say in everything from who got public contracts to which cabinet ministers got appointed, according to Haitian officials inside and outside his administration. But Mr. Moïse came to feel that they and other oligarchs were stifling his presidency, his aides say.

American officials say that they are looking closely at Mr. Moïse's efforts to disrupt the drug trade and challenge powerful families as motives in the assassination, and they note that Mr. Saint-Rémy emerged as a possible suspect early in the investigation. But they caution that Mr. Moïse threatened a large swath of the economic elite, including a number of people with deep criminal connections.

Mr. Martelly and Mr. Saint-Rémy did not respond to a detailed list of questions for this article.

The investigation into Mr. Moïse's killing has stalled, American officials say, and if the assassination is not solved, many Haitians fear it will add to the mountain of impunity in the country, further emboldening the criminal networks that have captured the state.

Suspected drug and arms traffickers have long sat in Haiti's Parliament. Small planes with contraband frequently land on clandestine airstrips. Haitian police officers have been caught aiding drug smugglers, while judges are regularly bribed to throw cases.

Haiti may now provide the largest route for drugs destined for the United States, but no one knows for sure because the country has become so difficult to police. American law enforcement is unable to run a wiretapping program in the country, or even fully collaborate with its Haitian counterparts, because corruption in the police and judiciary runs so deep, U.S. officials say.

“Anyone involved in drug trafficking here has at least one police officer on their team,” said Compère Daniel, the police commissioner of the Northwest Department of Haiti, a major transit smuggling corridor.

“It is impossible to get police officers to cooperate with me on the field,” he said. “Sometimes they don’t even answer my calls.”

The D.E.A.’s operations in Haiti have also drawn scrutiny. Criticism of the agency has sharpened because at least two of the Haitians suspected of involvement in Mr. Moïse’s assassination were former D.E.A. informants.

In November, the Senate Judiciary Committee criticized the D.E.A. for corruption allegations that have swirled around its Haiti operations, citing a Times investigation in August linking Mr. Moïse’s head of palace security to the drug trade. The D.E.A., accused by former agents of mishandling one of Haiti’s biggest drug cases, declined to comment.

#### **‘The True Leader Wasn’t the President’**

When Mr. Moïse was chosen by Mr. Martelly in 2014 to be his successor, Mr. Martelly introduced the nation to a supposed outsider with peasant origins, a man of the countryside who had lifted himself out of poverty by running banana plantations.

Mr. Martelly’s associates said he first met Mr. Moïse during a conference and was struck by the entrepreneur’s business acumen.

But the story was misleading: Mr. Moïse had mostly grown up in the capital, several of the original board members of his banana plantation say it was a failure, and Mr. Moïse was already a close associate of Mr. Saint-Rémy and at least one other suspected drug trafficker.

Mr. Moïse, 53 at the time of his assassination, was born in Trou-du-Nord, French for “hole of the North,” an agricultural town that has suffered under decades of government neglect. His father drove a tractor at a nearby sisal plantation but lost his job when it closed, according to interviews with local residents.

When Mr. Moïse was 7, his mother moved him and his siblings to Carrefour, a slum of Port-au-Prince, in search of work and a secondary school for her children, relatives said. In university, Mr. Moïse met his wife and they moved together to her hometown, Port-de-Paix, in the northwest.

By 2000, Mr. Moïse had met and become business partners with Evinx Daniel, according to relatives and acquaintances of both men. Mr. Daniel, a close friend of Mr. Martelly’s, would later be accused of drug trafficking.

Mr. Moïse worked with Mr. Daniel on one of his ventures, Mariella Food Products, which produced biscuits with a pigtailed schoolgirl on the packaging. A former high-ranking Haitian police officer said the company was suspected of being a money laundering front.

The full extent of Mr. Moïse’s involvement in the company is unclear, but a former senator, Jean Baptiste Bien-Aimé, recalled the men coming to his office to talk about the company about a decade ago, and said the men were often with Mr. Saint-Rémy, the brother-in-law of Mr. Martelly.

“They were always together. They were fish crushed in the soup,” said Mr. Bien-Aimé, using a local saying to describe close relationships.



Mr. Saint-Rémy has publicly admitted that he sold drugs in the past but claims all his businesses are now legitimate. Haitian law enforcement officials and former D.E.A. officers who recently served in Haiti say he is still believed to be one of the country's biggest drug traffickers.

Jacques Jean Kinan, Mr. Moïse's cousin, said he and Mr. Moïse worked with Mr. Saint-Rémy in the eel industry.

With his brother-in-law as president, Mr. Saint-Rémy wielded enormous influence, often demanding that choice licenses and contracts be awarded to him, particularly eel export licenses, according to officials in Mr. Martelly's government.

When his demands were not heeded, he could turn violent: In 2015, Mr. Saint-Rémy assaulted an agriculture minister for issuing a contract without his consent, an altercation reported at the time and confirmed by a former government minister.

As Mr. Saint-Rémy's hold on the eel trade solidified, Mr. Moïse decided to get out of the sector and focus on Agritrans, a banana plantation near his hometown.

"My father said that the Martelly family cornered the eel business and made it difficult to get in," said Joverlein Moïse, the slain president's son.

Mr. Moïse also kept in touch with his associate, Mr. Daniel, who had opened a hotel in Les Cayes, a coastal city in the south, an official and a relative said.

In 2013, Mr. Daniel told the authorities that he found 23 packages of marijuana floating at sea while he was on his boat and decided to bring them home. Mr. Daniel said at the time that he and Mr. Saint-Rémy called the D.E.A. to pick up the load he discovered.

A prosecutor, Jean Marie Salomon, doubted the story, suspecting it was a ploy to cover up a drug deal gone bad after locals had stumbled on the stash. He arrested Mr. Daniel on drug-trafficking charges, but he said Mr. Martelly's minister of justice personally intervened and ordered his release.

Shortly after, Mr. Martelly went to Mr. Daniel's hotel with a delegation in a clear display of support, Mr. Salomon said. "The message was, justice does not matter," he said.

Just months after his release, Mr. Daniel went missing in 2014, his abandoned car found at a gas station. Two people — a relative of Mr. Daniel's and a police officer at the time — said Mr. Moïse was one of the last people to see him alive. Mr. Daniel is presumed dead.

Mr. Salomon suspects that drug traffickers killed him, concerned that he would expose their network as part of a plea deal, and Mr. Daniel's disappearance remains unsolved. Two investigators said they were sidelined by a federal police unit controlled by Mr. Martelly's government that took over the investigation and tampered with the evidence.

Barred by the Constitution from running for two consecutive terms, Mr. Martelly began looking for a successor. He wanted to find someone to keep the bench warm for him until he could launch another presidential bid and shield himself from corruption allegations involving the misappropriation of billions of dollars during his tenure, according to former officials in the Martelly and Moïse administrations.

He settled on Mr. Moïse, marketing him as a successful entrepreneur and nicknaming him the "Banana Man" on the campaign trail.

"I told Martelly, you have to look for the peasant vote, someone who looks like them, someone with black skin," said a former senator, Jacques Sauveur Jean, a friend and sometimes political ally of Mr. Martelly. He said Haitians were tired of the privileged light-skinned elite who ran the country, like Mr. Martelly, and felt that Mr. Moïse, with his dark skin and rural origins, better represented them.

In interviews, three of the original board members of Mr. Moïse's plantation business, Agritrans, described the venture as a failure, with their original investments lost and little but a barren field to show for it.

But as Mr. Martelly contemplated a successor, the company received a \$6 million loan from the government.

Esther Antoine, one of Mr. Moïse's campaign managers, said she worked to polish his image, to get rid of a stutter that had haunted him and improve his confidence onstage. But on the campaign trail Mr. Martelly took center stage, she said, outshining the man he was supposed to be promoting.

Ms. Antoine, who worried that Mr. Martelly's outsized presence was "drowning" her candidate, said she convinced the president to give Mr. Moïse the space to campaign alone. That did not sit well with Mr. Martelly's wife, Sophia, she said.

She said the first lady grew suspicious of Ms. Antoine and called her to the Martelly family home in the middle of the night, reprimanding her for not informing them of Mr. Moïse's every move.

Ms. Antoine said she pushed back, arguing that she was there to work for Mr. Moïse, not the Martelly family.

"That's when the wife looks at me and says, 'Jovenel is a property. You don't seem to understand that,'" Ms. Antoine recounted. "I was shocked. When I asked her to repeat it, she then switched to French: 'Jovenel est une propriété.'"

The former first lady did not respond to a detailed list of questions for this article.

When he won and took over the presidency in 2017, Mr. Moïse felt suffocated by Mr. Martelly but remained loyal to him, his aides said.

Mr. Moïse was unable to choose his own cabinet without the approval of the Martelly family or Mr. Saint-Rémy, they said. The Martellys would often call Mr. Moïse, yelling at him for his legislative initiatives, according to several people who overheard the conversations.

"The true leader wasn't the president," said Gabriel Fortuné, a close adviser to Mr. Moïse who died in an earthquake a day after speaking with The Times. "It was his godfather, Martelly. When we talk about the godfather we are talking about the Italian way," he added, "the family."

Ms. Antoine acknowledged that Mr. Moïse often turned a blind eye to the corruption in his government, to avoid making enemies and advance his own initiatives.

"He would say, 'Let me feed them so they leave me alone. If they're making money, they'll let me do my electricity and build my roads,'" Ms. Antoine recalled him saying.

But Mr. Moïse's critics said he joined in the corruption. Before he came to power, the Haitian government was investigating Mr. Moïse, his wife and their company, Agritrans, for large amounts of money found in their bank accounts that could not be explained by the level of business they were generating, an official who worked on the case said.

Two government anti-corruption units also questioned why Mr. Martelly's government gave a \$6 million loan to Agritrans, a company with such a limited record. But when Mr. Moïse came to power, he fired the directors of the two anti-corruption units who worked on the inquiry.

**'They Will Kill Me'**

As Mr. Moïse settled into office, he soon realized that the withering control Mr. Martelly and his family exerted on the campaign trail extended to his personal security, several officials said.

Mr. Moïse inherited Dimitri Hérard, a pivotal member of Mr. Martelly's presidential security force who became the head of the police unit protecting Mr. Moïse's presidential palace

Mr. Hérard was also a drug-trafficking suspect. In 2015, when a Panamanian-flagged cargo ship docked in Port-au-Prince with 1,100 kilograms of cocaine and heroin aboard, Mr. Hérard was seen commanding police officers in uniform to load the drugs into vehicles before speeding off with them, according to a witness and Keith McNichols, a former D.E.A. agent stationed in Haiti who led the agency's investigation into the missing drug shipment.

But Mr. Martelly shielded Mr. Hérard from being questioned by investigators in the case, a former United Nations official said.

Mr. Moïse deeply mistrusted Mr. Hérard, according to several presidential advisers and an international diplomat the president confided in. On at least one occasion, they said, Mr. Hérard was found spying on the president for Mr. Saint-Rémy, informing him about Mr. Moïse's meetings.

Mr. Hérard, now in detention as a suspect in the assassination, could not be reached for comment.

In January, Mr. Hérard ordered about 260 weapons from Turkey — including M4 carbines and handguns — making out the order to the presidential palace, Mr. Fortuné and a former security official said. But instead of arming his own unit, they said, Mr. Hérard sold most of the weapons to gangs and businesses.

“When Moïse found out about the weapons Hérard ordered, he wasn't surprised — he was scared,” Mr. Fortuné said.

Mr. Moïse's relationship with the presidential security forces, already on tenterhooks, further soured. But that changed in February, when Mr. Hérard claimed to have foiled a coup attempt against Mr. Moïse. Suddenly, the distrust waned. Some former aides, like Ms. Antoine and Mr. Fortuné, wondered whether the supposed coup was a false flag, to throw off Mr. Moïse's suspicions about Mr. Hérard.

After the coup scare, Mr. Moïse went on the offensive, publicly blasting Haiti's oligarchs and political elite for trying to kill him, including in one of his final interviews with The Times before his death.

Behind the scenes, Haitian officials say, Mr. Moïse began working to take down his perceived enemies. He spoke with his closest aides and select officials to start compiling the dossier breaking down narcotics and weapons smuggling networks in Haiti, including Mr. Saint-Rémy, according to the people involved with the document.

In February, Josua Alusma, the mayor of Port-du-Paix and a close Moïse ally, ordered a crackdown on the eel trade, the industry dominated by Mr. Saint-Rémy. Many of the eels go to China, but the Haitian police are investigating the industry as a way to launder illicit profits.

“I don't like this business. It happens at night, do you know what I'm saying?” Mr. Alusma said. “There's no security.”

He said the industry needed to be regulated and taxed. “People like Kiko go in and out of the city,” he said, using Mr. Saint-Rémy's nickname. “But we are the ones here cleaning his trash,” he added, referring to illegal weapons seized during a raid this year.

The same month, the president also started to discuss plans to nationalize a seaport owned by allies of Mr. Martelly, where several shipments of illegal weapons have been found and seized over the years, two senior Haitian officials said.

“Jovenel told me that he had an agenda that he wanted to implement but he couldn’t because, he said, ‘They will kill me,’” recounted a powerful politician who served as an informal aide to Mr. Moïse, speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of his life. The port, he said, “was part of the plan.”

Mr. Moïse also tried to push customs, despite considerable resistance, to start inspecting Mr. Saint-Rémy’s shipments and charging taxes on his goods, according to several presidential aides, two senior security officials and an official at the customs department. Haitian economists estimate that the country loses about \$500 million a year because of corruption at customs.

Then, in mid-May, Dominican security forces arrested Woodley Ethéart, also known as Sonson Lafamilia, a close friend of Mr. Martelly and Mr. Saint-Rémy’s. When Mr. Martelly was president in 2015, he stood by Mr. Ethéart after he was arrested on kidnapping charges.

This year, Mr. Ethéart still had a warrant out for his arrest and generally kept a low profile. But in May, he and Mr. Martelly took photos of themselves partying together in Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic’s capital, that were posted on social media, a senior Dominican official said.

The next day, Dominican forces arrested Mr. Ethéart and extradited him to Haiti.

Mr. Moïse was ecstatic, his aides said.

The president’s phone buzzed with calls from Mr. Martelly and Mr. Saint-Rémy, but he refused to answer them, according to a close friend and a presidential adviser.

“Sonson Lafamilia is very close to the Martelly family,” said Joverlein, Mr. Moïse’s son. “It is possible that Martelly saw that arrest as some kind of disrespect, that my father was a traitor and was betraying the Martelly family.”

Drug trafficking routes in Haiti’s north also came under pressure. In the 1990s, little Cessna planes from Colombia landed on dirt airstrips on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince. But as the population expanded, the landing strips became surrounded by slums. Poor residents realized the valuable illicit cargo the planes held and began raiding them, according to a security official.

So, about a decade ago, traffickers moved the airstrips north, to Savane Diane, a sprawling, isolated area. Since then, the drug trade has evolved and boomed. The planes no longer come solely from Colombia — Venezuela has become a big player, too, with family members of President Nicolas Maduro arrested by the D.E.A. in Haiti in 2015 for drug trafficking. The son of Honduras’s former president was also arrested in Haiti by the D.E.A.

This year, Mr. Moïse approved an agro-industrial zone in Savane Diane, but when the project broke ground, officials found they were about three miles south of one of Haiti’s most active airstrips for cocaine and heroin deliveries.

The small lake nearby was filled with fish, in an area where malnutrition is rampant, yet locals would not go near it. When The Times asked them why, farmers explained that human remains were often dumped there.

And when The Times went to the local airstrip, a farmer with a machete in his hand approached, asking if a drug delivery was happening so that he could get a bribe to look the other way.

Two jagged dirt strips — one path for each wheel — cut through waist-high grass. Yards from the airstrip lay the hull of a small plane that, residents say, crashed over the summer. The wreckage of another charred plane lay close by.

When the police cars that are often seen offloading the planes' cargo get stuck along the rough roads, local tractor drivers get paid a few dollars to tow them out, residents said. Before a plane comes, they added, farmers cut the grass around the airstrip and start fires in empty cans so pilots know where to land at night.

Mr. Moïse's aides said he became aware of the airstrip after a furious call from the D.E.A.

Between May and June, the airstrip in Savane Diane and another in Haiti's north hosted an inordinate amount of traffic, with at least a dozen planes coming through, potentially carrying thousands of kilos of cocaine, Haitian security officials say. In mid-June, the D.E.A. called the Haitian authorities, demanding to know why there was such an uptick, according to Haitian officials with knowledge of the communication.

Several of the planes had even stopped in Port-au-Prince to refuel in the middle of the night, when the airport was closed, they said.

When Mr. Moïse found out about the deliveries in mid-June, he was fuming, his aides said. Then came an order from the presidential palace: Destroy the airstrip.

But the local authorities refused to do it, according to several officials interviewed.

About a week later, Mr. Moïse was at home with his wife and two children when hit men burst into his home. They had been let into the presidential compound by Mr. Hérard's forces. In his initial testimony, Mr. Hérard said they stood down when the gunmen identified themselves as D.E.A. agents.

Not a single shot was fired between the assassins and Mr. Moïse's guards. As the gunmen stormed the residence, the president called Mr. Hérard and another security official to rescue him, his widow told The Times. No help came.

One of the men leading the assassins, Joseph Felix Badio, was a former D.E.A. informant who called the country's new prime minister, Ariel Henry, multiple times in the days just before and the hours right after the assassination, according to a copy of the police report. Mr. Henry, a close ally of Mr. Martelly, has denied any involvement in the killing.

Mr. Badio is still on the loose, but in the weeks after the assassination he was seen in bulletproof government vehicles, according to a security officer who was involved in the investigation.

Mr. Henry has stripped the government of Mr. Moïse's former allies. Last month, he appointed a new justice minister, Berto Dorcé — who, according to a D.E.A. investigation, bribed one of the judges overseeing the case of the Panamanian-flagged vessel with 1,100 kilos of drugs aboard. A former senior Haitian law enforcement official also said Mr. Dorcé once spent months in jail in connection with drug trafficking.

Mr. Dorcé did not answer a list of questions for this article. Mr. Martelly is in Miami, where he lives, mulling another presidential run, his associates say.

National elections will be held next year, and Mr. Martelly is considered a front-runner.

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HEADLINE	12/12 Hardships in prisons for Covid lockdowns
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/12/prisons-covid-lockdown-hardships-us">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/12/prisons-covid-lockdown-hardships-us</a>
GIST	<p>Mwalimu Shakur could only talk for six minutes.</p> <p>Shakur is at California's Corcoran state prison, where there have been 1,290 Covid cases and seven deaths since the pandemic hit. During our phone call just before Thanksgiving, the prison was on the verge of graduating from the tight phase one reopening protocols that typically follow an outbreak — just as millions of Americans on the outside prepared to mark the milestone of an in-person holiday season. This meant</p>

that Shakur and the other 3,604 men at Corcoran were allotted just one hour each day to shower and stand in line for the handful of phones.

Phase two would grant the men an additional 30 minutes out of cell, and the return of in-person visits. But it hadn't happened yet. "That's supposed to be starting today, so we'll see," Shakur told me. Someone was waiting for the phone, so he had to go.

Even as Covid infection rates begin to climb across the US, the arrival of vaccines and boosters have made many feel like the pandemic is over. In prisons, however, life looks much like it did at the start of the pandemic. Quarantines and lockdowns remain common, along with confusing and conflicting information from the people in charge. For incarcerated people nationwide, it's almost as if the spring of 2020 keeps repeating itself.

I've spent years reporting on prison conditions across the country – conditions that were often deplorable even before Covid hit. Last March, when I began receiving letters from incarcerated people detailing their experiences of the pandemic, those early letters mirrored the confusion promulgated by top government authorities about the virus. Now, nearly two years later, many describe policies that seem more punitive than preventive.

### **'I'm more afraid of another lockdown than of getting sick'**

Inside prisons across the US, 34 of every 100 people are known to have been infected with Covid, nearly four times the infection rate of the general US population. Public health researchers cite crowding as a major contributing factor; several state prison systems and the federal Bureau of Prisons are operating past 100% capacity.

All the while, incarcerated people have reported being stuck in cramped cells and crowded dorms with little access to PPE, soap, or other cleaning supplies, among prison staff who often flout masking protocols with little consequence. "I think the most disturbing thing for me is the no-mask guards," says "Alice", who is incarcerated in the federal prison in Aliceville, Alabama, which has remained crowded throughout the pandemic. (Alice asked that her real name be withheld to avoid retaliation.)

But Alice cites other concerns, too: large numbers of unvaccinated people; a lack of testing; mingling between units in the dining hall during lunch. She has stopped going to lunch altogether. "In some ways, I feel like a sitting duck, with another wave of Covid just around the corner," Alice says. "The flimsy cotton masks we are given are no comfort there, either."

Alice isn't just worried for her health. Over the summer, she says that women who exhibited Covid-like symptoms were taken to solitary confinement, where they spent 23 hours alone in a cell. "Conditions there were horrendous, and some people were truly traumatized by that experience and still talk about it in my unit," she says. Meanwhile, the remaining women were locked in their cells for 23 hours each day, with one hour allowed for phone calls and showers.

Elena House-Hay, age 25, is one of 992 prisoners at Pennsylvania's Muncy women's prison, where more than 500 Covid cases have been reported since the pandemic began. Like Alice, she dreads the thought of another outbreak.

After testing positive for the virus last winter, House-Hay says she had to drag all her belongings through the snow to the prison's quarantine unit, an open dormitory with 32 cubicles that each contained two bunk beds. During the two 30-minute periods the women were allowed out of cell each day, they had to choose between showering or standing in line to phone home, send mail or sync their prison-issued tablets to receive and send e-messages. It was a miserable experience.

"I'm more afraid of the psychological consequences of another lockdown than I am of getting sick," says House-Hay.

### **The fallout of 'utter mismanagement'**

The persistent threat of Covid in prisons has taken a painful toll on the loved ones of those who are incarcerated. Though the majority of prison systems have reinstated outside visits, many have placed restrictive new visitation guidelines into place. At Muncy, for instance, House-Hay reports that the women are allowed to briefly hug but not kiss their visitors. They can no longer share food from the prison's vending machines, nor can children sit on their incarcerated parent's lap.

But some jails and prisons have not reinstated visits. The Spokane county jail in Washington state is among those that have not; the facility was also slow to adopt video calls, which only became available this July. For Maddesyn George, who was arrested in July 2020, the lack of video or in-person visits meant missing a year of her baby daughter's life. She watched her daughter Shynne grow from a four-month-old infant to a 19-month-old toddler through photographs that her parents mailed.

Now, she can see her on a screen for half an hour – but only if Shynne can stay focused on the computer.

Even in prisons that have reinstated visits, dramatic new restrictions on visiting hours pose another barrier to in-person family contact. Before the pandemic, Aliceville offered six-hour visits on weekends, and family members could visit both days. Now, visits are limited to one hour behind glass. At Muncy, pre-pandemic visits could last all day if visitors were traveling more than three hours, or if the visiting room wasn't busy, and guests could visit for several days in a row; today, they get one two-and-a-half-hour visit a week.

For both House-Hay and Alice, whose families live hundreds of miles from their respective prisons, the curtailed lengths have been prohibitive.

Alice takes advantage of the free video calls offered at Aliceville, scheduling three to four each week with her partner and children. While they're "certainly better than nothing," Alice says the calls are no replacement for in-person visits. But for now, the Bureau of Prisons says that Aliceville's visiting hours will not be extended, nor will contact visits be reinstated because of the fluctuating transmission rate in the surrounding community.

"At this point, prisons are using the utter mismanagement of Covid as an excuse to not reinstate normal operations," says Alice. "[Due to] their lack of Covid prevention measures, [they will] prolong the pandemic inside – and, with it, all the restrictions and hardships."

For House-Hay, the winter seems a bit more promising. Pennsylvania began offering prisoners incentives for vaccinations early on; in Muncy, that has resulted in the full vaccination of 78% of incarcerated people (as opposed to just 45% of staff). Because she is vaccinated, House-Hay is allowed to borrow books from the prison library, spend time in the prison yard, work at the prison metal shop and eat meals outside her cell. She makes Christmas decorations and plays games with friends in the common area. "It is not normal," she says, "but it is not stagnation."

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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Tacoma library confronts 'criminal activity'</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/tacoma-library-branch-temporarily-stops-in-building-services-citing-criminal-activity/7KTKZQT4OFGBFMBB6T3U7JXJ5U/">https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/tacoma-library-branch-temporarily-stops-in-building-services-citing-criminal-activity/7KTKZQT4OFGBFMBB6T3U7JXJ5U/</a>
GIST	<p>TACOMA, Wash. — Tacoma Public Library announced it will temporarily stop in-building services at its Mottet branch on Tacoma's Eastside until March, citing safety concerns and "suspected criminal activity."</p> <p>Library director Kate Larsen said in recent weeks staff members have been intimidated and in some cases followed home by people she believes are using the facility to distribute drugs. Larsen said three staff members have been followed home on foot, on public transportation and, in one case, by car.</p> <p>Tacoma Police Department spokesperson Wendy Haddow said police don't have evidence of drug dealing at the library but that community liaison officers and the sector lieutenants are working with the library to come up with strategies to address the issues.</p>



	<p>Larsen said the library branch called police twice in the last week because the people causing issues were back on the property, but officers haven't been able to offer much help.</p> <p>"I'm scared. Staff are scared," Larsen said.</p> <p>During the suspension of in-building services, Mottet Library at 3523 E. G St. will offer curbside services during its regular hours. The services include checking out materials, library card sign-ups and renewals as well as program kits, which are offered first come, first served. The curbside services do not include access to the computer lab, printing or photocopying. Restroom access will also not be offered.</p> <p>Larsen said she first became aware of the issue after evidence of drug dealing was found in the library's restrooms. Staff removed anything that could be used for a hiding spot, and then the activity moved to the public area of the library.</p> <p>The last day of in-building services at the library was Friday, Dec. 3. Larsen said that since the doors closed, the people who have been intimidating staff members have been seen coming onto the property and staring through windows.</p> <p>"We're in this really awful spot where we need to stand up for ourselves, but our staff is also actively being intimidated, and I don't want to put them in a situation of further intimidation," Larsen said.</p> <p>Larsen said she hopes the March reopening date will allow enough time for the suspected criminal activity to move on from the library branch.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Arrest: Bellingham student school threats</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.q13fox.com/news/16-year-old-arrested-for-bomb-gun-threats-at-sehome-high-school">https://www.q13fox.com/news/16-year-old-arrested-for-bomb-gun-threats-at-sehome-high-school</a>
GIST	<p><b>BELLINGHAM, Wash.</b> - A 16-year-old Sehome High School student faces felony charges for making gun and bomb threats.</p> <p><a href="#">Bellingham</a> Police say over the past week, Sehome students received several threats using the Apple 'Airdrop' feature, where someone can transfer files to nearby iPhones.</p> <p>On December 3, students got a message saying someone had a gun. Students reported the threat to administrators, who called the police. Officers found a student with an airsoft replica of a Glock handgun, and referred charges to the prosecutor's office. It was discovered the student was not involved with sending the threat.</p> <p>Police began forensic examinations of several phones to identify the suspect.</p> <p>On December 6, another threat came through claiming there was a bomb on campus. A third threat was made on December 8.</p> <p>On Friday, December 10, investigators focused on one student and spoke to him and his parents. Following the interview, police say they developed probable cause to book the teenager into the Whatcom County Jail for threats to bomb or injure property, a class B felony.</p> <p>No bomb or gun was found in the boy's possession.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Congo: kidnapped Red Cross workers freed</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/kidnapped-red-cross-workers-freed-eastern-congo-2021-12-11/">https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/kidnapped-red-cross-workers-freed-eastern-congo-2021-12-11/</a>

GIST	<p>GOMA, Democratic Republic of Congo, Dec 11 (Reuters) - Two staff members of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) abducted last month in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo have been freed, the humanitarian organisation said on Saturday.</p> <p>The ICRC said in late November that one Congolese citizen and an international staff member had been kidnapped in North Kivu province, where dozens of armed militias operate.</p> <p>"We are relieved by the return of our colleagues and we rejoice that they are able to return to their families," Rachel Bernhard, head of the ICRC's delegation in Congo, told Reuters.</p> <p>"We would like to reiterate that this kidnapping and all other attacks against humanitarian personnel can endanger activities dedicated to helping communities hard hit by the conflict."</p> <p>She provided no further details about the circumstances of the kidnapping or the subsequent liberation.</p> <p>The United Nations and humanitarian organisations have warned about an increase in attacks on aid workers in eastern Congo. Three employees of the U.N. refugee agency were injured on Wednesday in North Kivu when their vehicle came under fire.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 Charged in Capitol riot: fled overseas?</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/us/california-man-charged-jan-6-us-capitol-riot-flees-belarus-2021-12-11/">https://www.reuters.com/world/us/california-man-charged-jan-6-us-capitol-riot-flees-belarus-2021-12-11/</a>
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON, Dec 10 (Reuters) - A California man charged with assaulting police in the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol and using a metal barricade as a battering ram has fled the United States and is believed to have taken refuge in Belarus, federal prosecutors said on Friday.</p> <p>Evan Neumann, 49, was indicted on Friday on 14 criminal counts stemming from the deadly Capitol siege by supporters of then-President Donald Trump, expanding on charges originally contained in a criminal complaint filed against Neumann in March.</p> <p>Neumann, of Mill Valley, California, near San Francisco, was seen in video footage donning a gas mask while standing near police in front of barricades set up at the base of the West Front of the Capitol Building, prosecutors said in a statement.</p> <p>According to documents filed in the case, Neumann later removes his gas mask and shouts at the police, "I'm willing to die, are you?" before he physically assaults several officers and rushes into them using a barricade as a battering ram.</p> <p>Neumann, who has yet to make a court appearance in the case, fled from the United States on Feb. 16 and "is currently believed to be in Belarus," the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia said in a statement.</p> <p>According to an account published by news outlet the Daily Beast, Neumann was featured last month in a Belarusian state television special titled "Goodbye, America," recounting his journey to the former Soviet republic and its capital, Minsk.</p> <p>He said on the program that he was seeking political asylum in Belarus because the United States, in his opinion, is no longer a country of law and order, the Daily Beast reported.</p> <p>Neumann is one of more than 220 individuals charged with assaulting or impeding law enforcement during the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, which disrupted a joint session of Congress meeting to formally certify the November 2020 presidential election victory of Democrat Joe Biden over Trump, the Republican incumbent.</p> <p>Neumann is believed to be the only international fugitive charged in connection with the Capitol riot.</p>

	<p>The siege followed a rally near the White House earlier that day in which Trump exhorted supporters to march on the Capitol during a speech in which he repeated false claims that the election was stolen from him through widespread voting fraud.</p> <p>Four people died the day of the riot, and one Capitol police officer died the next day of injuries sustained while defending Congress. Hundreds of police were injured during the multi-hour melee and four officers have since taken their own lives.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/11 Rising crime strikes Uber, Lyft drivers</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/uber-lyft-drivers-want-more-protection-as-rising-crime-keeps-many-off-the-roads-11639218601?mod=hp_lead_pos5">https://www.wsj.com/articles/uber-lyft-drivers-want-more-protection-as-rising-crime-keeps-many-off-the-roads-11639218601?mod=hp_lead_pos5</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>Lyft driver Lamont Liner thought he was picking up a regular fare in Chicago late last year. Instead, his passengers pulled out a pistol and stole his car and phone. He hasn't returned to drive for the app since, even as ride-sharing companies have tried to tempt drivers with more money.</p> <p>"The money is so good right now," said the 63-year-old. "But it's just not worth it to have somebody put a gun to your head."</p> <p>Ride-sharing companies Uber Technologies Inc. and Lyft Inc. —which were already struggling with a shortage of drivers caused by Covid-19 concerns—are grappling with a rise in violent crimes and implementing new safety measures and policies to try to better protect the drivers still on their systems. Drivers aren't returning as quickly as consumers, despite big bonuses from companies and the expiration of temporary unemployment benefits extended to gig workers.</p> <p>Overall homicide offenses in the U.S. jumped more than 20% in 2020 compared with 2019, according to Federal Bureau of Investigation data. Law-enforcement agencies say crime has continued to climb this year.</p> <p>While the companies declined to share data on attacks on their drivers, available data in some cities suggest drivers are getting caught up in a surge of carjackings, murders and other violent crimes. In Minneapolis, 494 carjackings were reported through Nov. 11, up 279% from those reported throughout 2019, according to a spokesman for the city's police. Ride-share drivers accounted for 11% of those cases. In Chicago, a police spokesman said that carjackings through Nov. 10 were up 36% compared with the same period last year. In Oakland, Calif., official data show carjackings through Nov. 7 were up 85% compared with the same period last year and 144% from the comparable 2019 period.</p> <p>Ride-share and food-delivery drivers were shot and killed in Washington, D.C., St. Louis, Mitchellville, Md., and other cities this year.</p> <p>Companies are taking steps to address the rise in crime but some drivers think they need to do more.</p> <p>"It's an absolute crisis," keeping drivers from coming back to work, said Lenny Sanchez, the Illinois director of the Independent Drivers Guild, a driver-run group.</p> <p>The ride-sharing apps have long had safety measures—for example, Uber has an emergency button that connects drivers to 911 and shares their GPS coordinates with dispatchers—and they are adding more.</p> <p>Earlier this year, Uber and Lyft made it mandatory for riders who use untraceable payment methods such as gift cards to upload government IDs. This summer, Uber backed a program to offer cash rewards to people with information on carjackers in and around Chicago. In the past 18 months, Lyft doubled the head count of its team that responds to data requests from law enforcement.</p>

“We’re committed to doing everything we can to help keep drivers safe,” said Lyft spokeswoman Ashley Adams. “Violent crime, including carjacking, has been on the rise across the United States.”

Later this month, Uber plans to test a new security feature that allows drivers and riders to record audio during a trip.

“You’ll constantly see us doing more and more,” said Sachin Kansal, Uber’s vice president of product management who also oversees safety. He said his team was doing “a ton of work,” particularly during the recent crime surge, to understand how they could make drivers feel safer.

Last month, Instacart Inc. said it started in-app alerts to its grocery pickers about crime or safety incidents near their locations, and DoorDash Inc. launched an emergency hotline for its drivers.

Drivers are doing what they can to protect themselves. Some will only work during the daytime or pick up passengers from the airport. Others have taken to wearing bulletproof vests, according to Mr. Sanchez.

Drivers say they want Uber, Lyft, and others to strengthen safeguards for drivers so they are at par with measures available to riders.

Drivers usually go through background checks, including getting screened for criminal history when they sign up. They are often required to take selfies on the job to prove that they are the ones driving.

Passengers, on the other hand, can create accounts using false names since the apps don’t require them to disclose their identities. Unlike drivers, they aren’t required to upload photos, which makes it easier for wrongdoers to pose as passengers or misuse existing accounts.

Customer background checks are used in other industries. Home-sharing giant Airbnb Inc. requires U.S. travelers to upload IDs and checks their information against criminal databases and sex-offender registers.

Families of slain drivers say knowing those details could make the difference between life and death. In August 2019, Uber driver Beaudouin Tchakounte and a passenger were shot and killed by a rider who used the app to hail a shared ride. The rider had a criminal history dating back to 1997, police records show, and was later convicted of these murders.

Mr. Tchakounte—a father of four—could have been spared had Uber applied the same checks it uses to filter potentially problematic drivers on passengers, his family says. Cassandra Porsch, a lawyer suing Uber on behalf of the family, says the companies have a duty to protect their drivers, even if they aren’t employees under the law.

Uber petitioned to dismiss the suit earlier this year, saying in its legal filing that “the law simply does not recognize this standard, nor is there any support for such a duty.” A judge has yet to rule on Uber’s request.

Ride-sharing companies say background checks aren’t required for other forms of transportation such as trains and planes, adding that they are heavily regulated, expensive and time-consuming.

Independent Drivers Guild’s Mr. Sanchez—a former ride-share driver who stopped driving because of health concerns and crime—says his organization wants riders uploading periodic selfies, as drivers do, so companies know their accounts aren’t being misused.

Lucas Chamberlain, a 37-year-old Uber driver in San Francisco was knocked out by a male passenger in March after he asked for an ID. The passenger looked under 18, he said, and the companies don’t allow unaccompanied minors. Mr. Chamberlain quit driving after the assault. He wants passengers’ ages to be vetted and their pictures visible on the app so drivers know who to unlock their cars for.

“It’s just not fair that these companies show our faces to customers and we can’t see their faces,” he said.

	<p>The companies say they cannot force riders to upload their photos onto the app.</p> <p>Some drivers say the companies can be slow to respond when they ask for help. Mr. Liner, the Chicago driver, says he reached Lyft after being carjacked to request that his rider and driver accounts be deactivated. A Lyft representative assured him they would be, he said.</p> <p>Mr. Liner says his account wasn't deactivated until late the next morning. Carjackers used his account to order Lyft rides throughout the night, according to ride receipts viewed by The Wall Street Journal. A second driver was carjacked in the process.</p> <p>Lyft said it was looking into the delay in deactivating Mr. Liner's account.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/10 Arrest: Virginia student threatens to school</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-vi/2021/12/10/manassas-park-high-school-threat/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-vi/2021/12/10/manassas-park-high-school-threat/</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>A 15-year-old Manassas Park High school student was charged with threats to kill Friday after police said he sent a comment on social media to another student about "shooting up" a school.</p> <p>Manassas Park Police said they interviewed the 15-year-old sophomore and his parents and found the threat was not credible and "there was no danger to the school system or the community." But the message, which authorities learned of Thursday, prompted officials to close school buildings Friday and have a virtual learning day.</p> <p>According to Manassas Park Police, Manassas Park City Schools notified police about 9 p.m. Thursday to a possible threat circulating on social media. Detectives began an investigation, "tracking down information in regards to Instagram accounts as well as IP addresses," police said in a statement.</p> <p>In a statement, Manassas Park City Schools Superintendent Melissa Saunders, said students reported the threat "circulating on social media regarding a potential shooting in one of our schools," which prompted the school system to "immediately" notify law enforcement.</p> <p>Shortly after midnight Friday, police said detectives identified and contacted the student. Detectives interviewed the youth and his parents at Manassas Park police headquarters, police said. Police said a search was then conducted of the family's residence, with the cooperation of the parents, and no firearm was found.</p> <p>Police arrested and charged the teen Friday evening. He is in custody at the Prince William County Juvenile Detention Center, police said.</p> <p>Manassas Park City Schools planned to resume activity tonight, including Friday sports activities, police said.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>12/11 Inside Texas' push to arrests migrants</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/11/us/texas-migrant-arrests-police.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/11/us/texas-migrant-arrests-police.html</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>BRACKETTVILLE, Texas — Magdaleno Ruiz Jimenez huddled under a waxing moon in the rough brush of a Texas ranch. His journey to the small border community of Brackettville had been long, about 1,300 miles from his home in Mexico. But now a drone was buzzing overhead.</p> <p>A lone officer, Sgt. Ryan Glenn, emerged from the darkness. He had a flashlight and a screen with coordinates for where Mr. Jimenez and six other men could be found on the cold caliche, blobs of heat visible to an infrared camera on the overhead drone. More officers soon arrived.</p>

"I spent everything to get here," Mr. Jimenez said after the officers wrested him and the other men from the brush.

The men assumed they had been detained by immigration officers for illegally crossing into the United States. They were wrong. Instead, they were arrested on charges of trespassing on a vast private ranch by highway patrol officers from the Texas state police

For several months now, Texas has been engaged in an effort to repurpose the tools of state law enforcement to stem the sudden increase of people crossing illegally into the country.

To do this, Texas officials led by Gov. Greg Abbott developed a way around the fact that immigration enforcement is a federal government job: State and local police departments partner with the owners of borderland ranches, and use trespassing laws to arrest migrants who cross their land.

"That's an effective way of sending a message," Mr. Abbott said, flanked by nine other Republican governors, at a news conference along the border this fall. "If you come into the state of Texas illegally, you have a high likelihood of not getting caught and released, but instead, arrested and jailed."

The new approach relies on the participation of local officials and, so far, it has been adopted in just two of the state's 32 border region counties: Kinney, which includes Brackettville, and Val Verde, its neighbor to the west.

State officials could not say what effect, if any, the program has had on reducing illegal crossings, which have surged to at least 1.2 million in Texas so far this year, the highest recorded figure in more than two decades. (It remains unclear how many migrants are trying to cross multiple times.) But the operation has upended life both for the migrants caught up in its ad hoc processes and for the rural residents living under its net.

Perhaps nowhere has that been more acutely felt than the town of Brackettville, a former frontier outpost of 1,700 known for its surrounding hunting and cattle ranches, an old fort that once housed the army's Black Seminole scouts, and an aging replica of the Alamo built for a John Wayne film.

Lately, it has been flooded with state police.

High speed chases are so frequent that the local school installed rock barriers to protect against crashes. Helicopters patrol the night sky. Ranchers, who are mostly white, lock their doors and carry pistols around their own properties, which many never did before. Town residents, a majority of whom are poor and Hispanic, complain they are routinely followed by officers newly assigned to the area.

"That happens to a lot of people here in Brackett," said the mayor, Eric Martinez, using the nickname for the town. He said he was followed and then pulled over after leaving a City Council meeting because, the officer told him, his license plate light was not bright enough.

The police push is part of an ongoing clash between Mr. Abbott and the Biden administration over how to handle the sudden increase of arrivals at the border with Mexico. Federal agents have been rapidly expelling migrants under a public health rule, but Mr. Abbott argues that the government has done little to halt the flow of them. He has dedicated \$3 billion for a series of measures at the border, including sending state police and troops from the Texas State Guard, creating a border barrier with shipping containers and using the National Guard to construct several miles of fencing along the Rio Grande.

But the arrests of migrants for criminal trespassing has been a more disruptive element of what is known as Operation Lone Star, crowding courts and local jail populations and raising alarm among defense lawyers and advocates for migrants.

A spokeswoman for U.S. Customs and Border Protection declined to comment on the initiative, and federal agents are not partnering with the state police in making trespassing arrests.

Representative Joaquin Castro, a San Antonio Democrat, has asked for a federal investigation of the Operation Lone Star, saying in a letter this fall to the Justice Department that the program was “wreaking havoc on Texas’ judicial system” and has “directly led to a violation of state laws and constitutional due process rights.”

The men arrested under the program, some 2,000 so far, have often been held for weeks without access to lawyers. More than 1,000 are currently being held in state prisons that were repurposed to house them. (Women and children have been turned over to federal agents.)

Because the process is new, and taking place in small rural counties, the usual system for assigning criminal defense lawyers has been overwhelmed. Kinney County has also struggled to file arrest paperwork in the time required by law.

After their arrests, migrants are transferred to a single processing center, a large tent in the border town of Del Rio — where a surge of Haitian migrants flooded the community earlier this year — and then transferred to the repurposed state prisons in other counties.

While the state police checks identification documents of those arrested, the men are not turned over to federal authorities until the end of their cases, a process that, so far, has often lasted several months. Among those who have gone before a judge, most have had their cases dismissed or have been released on bond as they await hearing dates, their lawyers said.

And many of those released who have sought asylum have been allowed to stay in the United States to pursue their cases, defense lawyers said, unlike those apprehended at the border by federal authorities, because the public health rule that is used to rapidly expel migrants applies to new arrivals, not those already in the country.

Still, many have languished in state prisons awaiting a hearing, raising constitutional concerns.

Despite the extra law enforcement, the tide of migrants across the U.S. border has continued, and tensions have grown in Kinney County. Officials have discussed bringing in a militia group, Patriots for America, for help, or hiring private security contractors with experience in Iraq and Afghanistan. The county has been soliciting donations through a religious fund-raising site so it can “curb the invasion of America.”

More than 50 Kinney County ranchers have signed up with the Texas Department of Public Safety to allow the state police to patrol on their property and arrest people for trespassing, the agency said.

In interviews, ranchers who signed up for the program described feeling increasingly unsafe on their own land, because of the possibility of running into groups of migrants, though none of the ranchers said they had been assaulted or threatened. They trade information via Facebook and by text message and share stories on the latest “bailout” — a familiar local term for the end of a police chase in which migrants attempt to run from a car or truck, often after it has crashed.

Seated on the oak-shadowed patio of their ranch, a few head of cattle walking slowly nearby, Bill and Carolyn Conoly said the situation this year was the worst they could remember.

“We’re constantly repairing,” Mr. Conoly said, referring to ranch fences that are bent or cut. “We keep the doors locked and I have a gun available.”

Motion-activated cameras on the ranch capture images of passing migrants, information that helps the state police locate them. Earlier that day, cameras had picked up a large group walking through the Conoly family ranch; the police caught up with the migrants at night on an adjacent ranch — 14 men and one woman.



For months, the Conolys have also had constables from Galveston, just south of Houston and about 370 miles away, staying in their white stucco guesthouse.

“If it makes a difference, I don’t know,” said one of the constables, Lt. Paul Edinburgh, who had never been to the border before. “But it’s better than me sitting on the couch reading about it.”

Around 9 p.m. on a recent weeknight, a row of state highway patrol SUVs sat outside the only gas station in town, as two officers, parked nearby, led a woman out of their car and removed her handcuffs.

The woman, an American citizen, had been caught transporting 10 undocumented people in a pickup truck, the officers said, a felony. But because Kinney County did not have a place to hold women, she was given a court date and released.

Not long after, an officer with a drone located a group of men on a nearby ranch. Sergeant Glenn, who was leading a team of seven officers that night, searched for tracks on the ground. It was then that he found Mr. Jimenez, the man who had traveled from Chiapas, Mexico.

A house painter looking for a job, Mr. Jimenez had tried to cross the border once before, in August. After being turned back, he gathered more money and paid to cross again — 150,000 pesos, he said, or about \$7,000.

“There’s almost no work. They suffer,” he said of people in Chiapas, a Mexican state along the border with Guatemala. Now, with all his money spent on trying to cross, he would not have enough to return home. (He is currently being held on \$2,500 bond.)

As the officers awaited their prisoner transport — rented white vans without official insignia — they received an alert of movement from a camera deep inside another ranch. It was 12:20 a.m.

The police vehicles bumped across overgrown ranch roads. A helicopter hovered over what appeared to be three migrants but was running out of gas.

The officers arrived at a locked gate and decided to cut the lock. When they could go no further by car, they started walking. But after a long march across rough terrain, and a meticulous search in the thorny brush, no one could be found.

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HEADLINE	12/10 ‘Very difficult year’ NYC jails
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/10/nyregion/rikers-jail-death-15th-person.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/10/nyregion/rikers-jail-death-15th-person.html</a>
GIST	<p>A Brooklyn man being held at the Rikers Island jail complex died on Friday after a medical emergency — becoming the 15th person to die this year at a time when New York City’s correction system has been embroiled in a continuing crisis.</p> <p>The man, Malcolm Boatwright, 28, had been at the Bellevue Hospital Center since Thursday after having seizures, correction and union officials said. He died early on Friday morning after cardiac arrest, though an official cause of death was still pending.</p> <p>Mr. Boatwright, who had autism, had been detained for nearly a month on sexual abuse charges and related offenses, court records show. He had been ordered held on Rikers Island pending the results of a psychiatric exam that had been requested by his defense lawyer on the case, in which he had been accused of touching a 6-year-old boy’s genitals.</p> <p>Officials have struggled to respond to converging crises — a pandemic and a staffing problem that has crippled the correction system. This has been the deadliest year in New York City jails since 2016.</p>

“This is a heartbreaking loss at the end of a very difficult year,” Vincent N. Schiraldi, the city’s jails commissioner, said in a statement on Friday.

His death comes just days after a federal monitor appointed to oversee reforms at the troubled jail complex wrote in his latest report that the Department of Correction was “trapped in a state of disrepair” with no sign of major improvement, calling it a system that is “rife with violence and disorder.”

Mr. Boatwright’s mother, Lashawn Boatwright, said that her son had the mind of an 11-year-old, but that he had been in good physical health when he entered Rikers.

During a phone conversation this week, Ms. Boatwright recounted, her son spoke cryptically about his experience at the jail. He said that he thought one correction officer disliked him and that a detainee had given him a “warning.” The next day, Mr. Boatwright told his mother he had hit his head.

“I said, ‘Malcolm, did somebody hit you?’ He brushed it off,” she said, adding that he said that he had had a seizure, though he had no history of them. He declined to give his mother additional details, noting that he did not trust the people around him.

While at Bellevue, Mr. Boatwright told his mother that he had been checked out and was being returned to the jail.

“He never made it,” she said.

An officer touring the hospital ward found Mr. Boatwright on the floor, and he appeared ill and unresponsive, said Joseph Russo, president of the union representing deputy wardens and assistant deputy wardens. The officer called for medical assistance, but Mr. Boatwright went into cardiac arrest, Mr. Russo said.

Mr. Boatwright had told his mother that the conditions in the jail, where he had been held since Nov. 12, were terrible.

“He was scared to take a shower,” she said, adding that he said other detainees had threatened him and thrown hot water, feces and urine on him.

Ms. Boatwright said that her son had proclaimed his innocence and planned on pleading not guilty to the latest charges.

Before his latest arrest, Mr. Boatwright lived in an inpatient rehabilitation center in Brooklyn where he had been receiving services.

Mr. Boatwright had a history of child sexual abuse charges.

In 2012, prosecutors said he had placed his mouth on a 7-year-old boy’s genitals. He was convicted of first-degree sexual abuse and sentenced to six months in jail and 10 years on probation, according to court records.

In 2013, he pleaded guilty to charges of criminal contempt for violating an order of protection that required him to stay away from the child. He was scheduled to be sentenced the next year, but absconded, until he was arrested last month.

According to the state’s Sex Offender Registry, Mr. Boatwright was listed as a Level 1 offender, which for him meant a lifetime listing because the offense was deemed violent.

Hemangi Pai, now a supervising lawyer at Brooklyn Defender Services, who represented Mr. Boatwright in 2013, remembered him as a “kind young man” who struggled with a history of trauma and cognitive deficiencies.

	<p>Ms. Pai said Mr. Boatwright was victimized during that stint in jail and the experience had stayed with him.</p> <p>“He would cry the whole time because of how horrible the experience was,” she said. “Just seeing this young man who had so many issues — he didn’t need to be incarcerated.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/11 Ex-Panama president sons extradited to US</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/11/nyregion/panama-president-sons-charges.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/11/nyregion/panama-president-sons-charges.html</a>
GIST	<p>A Brooklyn court plans to arraign the son of a former Panamanian president on money-laundering charges on Saturday, the result of an extradition case that according to prosecutors featured a stealth getaway to the Bahamas, fake diplomatic credentials and a private jet idling on a tarmac in Guatemala.</p> <p>The defendant, Ricardo Alberto Martinelli Linares, was <a href="#">captured in Guatemala last year</a> with his brother and indicted in February. He was extradited to the United States on Friday and will face charges in U.S. District Court in Brooklyn, prosecutors say.</p> <p>The cases against Mr. Martinelli Linares and his brother are linked to the U.S. government’s larger investigation into Odebrecht, <a href="#">a Brazilian construction conglomerate</a> that prosecutors say <a href="#">paid nearly \$800 million in bribes</a> to officials and political parties in several countries. In 2016, Odebrecht and its affiliated petrochemical firm, Braskem, <a href="#">pleaded guilty to federal bribery charges</a> in the Eastern District court and agreed to pay at least \$3.5 billion in penalties.</p> <p>The other Martinelli brother, Luis Enrique Martinelli Linares, 39, was extradited <a href="#">to the United States</a> last month and <a href="#">pleaded guilty</a> at the Eastern District court last week to laundering \$28 million as part of the Odebrecht scheme. He could serve up to 20 years in prison.</p> <p>The brothers’ father, Ricardo Alberto Martinelli Berrocal, 69, <a href="#">governed Panama from 2009</a> until 2014 and has said he may run for president there again in 2024. Four years after leaving office, he was extradited <a href="#">from the United States to Panama</a> to face charges related to an illegal wiretapping scheme that prosecutors said he had conducted while in office. A Panamanian court <a href="#">absolved him of those charges last month</a>.</p> <p>Federal prosecutors said in a letter to an Eastern District judge late Friday that Ricardo Alberto Martinelli Linares had been indicted on charges of conspiracy to launder tens of millions of dollars in bribes “on behalf of a close relative who was a high-ranking government official in Panama” from 2009 until 2014. Prosecutors have used similar language in his brother’s case.</p> <p>The letter on Friday did not mention the former president by name.</p> <p>American prosecutors have accused the Martinelli brothers, who are residents of both Panama and Italy, of hiding proceeds from the Odebrecht scheme partly through financial transactions made through U.S. banks, some of them in New York. The Panamanian government has also sought them over involvement in the scheme.</p> <p>For years after Odebrecht’s guilty plea in 2016, U.S. prosecutors say, the Martinelli brothers met with American officials to discuss the case, and eventually the logistics of potential plea deals.</p> <p>But in June 2020, the brothers left for the Bahamas, traveling by an “unknown vessel” and evading United States border controls, prosecutors said in their letter on Friday.</p> <p>In the Bahamas, the brothers, along with Mr. Luis Martinelli Linares’s wife and children, boarded a private plane and flew to Panama, prosecutors said. But the aircraft was turned away because of pandemic-</p>

related travel restrictions, so they flew on to Costa Rica and then El Salvador — just as the federal Eastern District court was issuing warrants for their arrest.

The brothers then traveled by Uber from El Salvador’s capital, San Salvador, to the Guatemala border, prosecutors said. At the time, Guatemala was not allowing visitors, but the brothers were able to slip in by falsely representing themselves as officials of the Central American Parliament.

The brothers later obtained emergency humanitarian authorization from Panama’s health minister to enter the country, prosecutors said. But on or around July 6, they were arrested at an airport in Guatemala City as they attempted to board the family’s private jet and fly to Panama.

Representatives for the Martinelli brothers could not be reached for comment late Friday.

Luis Enrique Martinelli Linares, who was extradited to the United States last month and pleaded guilty on money laundering charges last week, is in detention while he awaits sentencing in May 2022, prosecutors say.

In their letter on Friday to Judge Robert M. Levy, a team of prosecutors led by [Breon S. Peace](#), the U.S. attorney for Eastern District of New York, described Ricardo Alberto Martinelli Linares as “a substantial and proven flight risk.”

“Given Ricardo Martinelli Linares’s actions over the past several years, it is clear that he will do anything to avoid prosecution in the United States and return to Panama, even despite the separate criminal charges pending against him in that country,” the prosecutors said.

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HEADLINE	12/10 ‘White nationalist’ jailed 10yrs; violent acts
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/10/us/proud-boys-alan-swinney-sentenced.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/10/us/proud-boys-alan-swinney-sentenced.html</a>
GIST	<p>A self-professed member of the Proud Boys from Texas who traveled to Portland, Ore., to confront protesters there last year was sentenced on Friday to 10 years in prison for shooting a man in the eye with a paintball gun, spraying people in the face with bear mace and aiming a loaded handgun at a crowd, prosecutors said.</p> <p>The Texas man, Alan Swinney, 51, was a “white nationalist vigilante cowboy,” who went to Portland to engage in political violence during <a href="#">protests there in the summer of 2020</a>, prosecutors said.</p> <p>In social media posts, he made threats against “the left” and “antifa,” prosecutors said, and he tried to recruit people to form a militia to fight in what he believed was a civil war.</p> <p>Mr. Swinney, who appeared at several demonstrations in the Northwest, became a “known entity” in Portland, as he instigated and committed violent acts under the banner of free speech and pro-police sentiments, prosecutors said.</p> <p>On two days — Aug. 15, 2020 and Aug. 22, 2020 — he led a small group of like-minded people and engaged in multiple acts of violence during demonstrations stemming from the murder of George Floyd, prosecutors said.</p> <p>Mr. Swinney caused a serious eye injury by shooting a man in the face with a paintball gun, and he discharged bear mace on multiple occasions — spraying some people directly in the face — and aimed a loaded Ruger .357 magnum handgun at a crowd, prosecutors said. He also shot people with paintballs, prosecutors said.</p> <p>In October, after a six-day trial, <a href="#">a Multnomah County jury found Mr. Swinney guilty</a> of 11 criminal charges, including second-degree assault, fourth-degree assault and unlawful use of a weapon with a firearm, prosecutors said.</p>

Mr. Swinney's lawyer, Joseph Westover, did not immediately respond on Friday to phone and email messages seeking comment.

During the trial, Mr. Westover argued that Mr. Swinney had been defending himself against "agitators" who were harassing him and that he saw himself as a "protector" who came to Portland to stand between demonstrators clad in black causing mayhem and "Back the Blue" protesters, [The Oregonian](#) reported.

In a [sentencing memorandum](#), prosecutors argued that letters, social media statements and testimony from Mr. Swinney showed that he had "no remorse for his actions, no desire to change and every intention of engaging in future acts of violence."

"During the trial, he quickly labeled all of the people that opposed him as terrorists, he expressed joy for those that were hurt, bragged about his actions, and strongly asserted that he would do it all over again if given the chance," prosecutors wrote.

Prosecutors included in the memorandum a letter that Mr. Swinney had written to Derek Chauvin, the former Minneapolis police officer who was [sentenced in June](#) to 22 and a half years in prison for murdering Mr. Floyd by kneeling on his neck for more than nine minutes as he pleaded for air.

"Our country has too many George Floyds in it," Mr. Swinney wrote. "It's time to clean house."

Prosecutors said that Mr. Swinney had called himself a "patriot" and that he was a self-professed member of the Proud Boys, the far-right group notorious for engaging in brawls.

The group has [come under scrutiny](#) as federal agents try to determine to what extent its leaders planned the assault on the Capitol on Jan. 6, when a mob of Trump supporters temporarily disrupted the certification of the presidential election results.

In August, the group's leader, Enrique Tarrio, was sentenced to five months in jail for possessing high-capacity rifle magazines a few days before the siege and for burning a stolen Black Lives Matter banner in Washington, D.C., after a Trump rally descended into violence in December 2020.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 SCSO: arrests, seizures Hwy99 emphasis</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/more-than-dozen-arrested-south-snohomish-county-operation-targeting-highway-99/XZBYPN3UM5GJFNTQ6FJZJS7TYA/">https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/more-than-dozen-arrested-south-snohomish-county-operation-targeting-highway-99/XZBYPN3UM5GJFNTQ6FJZJS7TYA/</a>
GIST	<p>EVERETT, Wash. — The Snohomish County Sheriff's Office arrested more than a dozen people during a joint operation with other agencies on Highway 99 in south Snohomish County Wednesday night.</p> <p>The sheriff's office spent several months meeting with business owners and members of the community to find a balanced approach to deal with issues in the area, according to a sheriff's office news release.</p> <p>Law enforcement agencies then worked together to arrest people with outstanding warrants, identify criminal activity and provide more officers near Highway 99 and Airport Road.</p> <p>During the joint operation, more than \$1,600 believed to be connected to drug sales were seized, one stolen vehicle and two stolen guns were recovered, more than 20 traffic stops were made and 28 vehicles that were previously tagged to be removed were impounded.</p> <p>Arrests were made for outstanding warrants, theft, possession of a stolen vehicle and distribution of drugs.</p> <p>Street drugs that were seized included 215 grams of methamphetamine, 30 grams of heroin, 133 fentanyl pills and 10 grams of MDMA.</p>

	<p>Deputies found a stolen vehicle on 128th Street Southwest that had two adults and a missing 16-year-old inside. Deputies also recovered two stolen guns from the vehicle.</p> <p>During the operation, seven people were referred to a team of deputies and social workers who helped connect homeless and vulnerable people to treatment and other services.</p> <p>Earlier this year, the sheriff's office began using emphasis patrols to target crime and offer outreach services in south Snohomish County. In late summer, the patrols were reduced due to staffing shortages.</p> <p>Early this year, the sheriff's office and Snohomish County Public Works cleaned up truckloads of trash near Center Road and in the Avondale area. The sheriff's office also put together a volunteer crew to clean up graffiti in several blocks of neighborhoods surrounding Highway 99.</p> <p>In the first six months of the patrol operation in 2021, the emphasis area saw a 30% decrease in the targeted crimes, the sheriff's office said.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 Feds: 2 faked Native American heritage</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://komonews.com/news/local/2-artists-charged-with-faking-native-american-heritage">https://komonews.com/news/local/2-artists-charged-with-faking-native-american-heritage</a>
GIST	<p>SEATTLE (AP) — Two artists are facing federal charges that they faked Native American heritage to sell works at downtown Seattle galleries.</p> <p>Lewis Anthony Rath, 52, of Maple Falls, and Jerry Chris Van Dyke, 67, also known as Jerry Witten, of Seattle, have been charged separately with violating the Indian Arts and Crafts Act, which prohibits misrepresentation in marketing American Indian or Alaska Native arts and crafts.</p> <p>The U.S. Attorney's Office said Rath falsely claimed to be a member of the San Carlos Apache Tribe, and Van Dyke falsely claimed membership in the Nez Perce Tribe. The goods included masks, totem poles and pendants sold in 2019 at Raven's Nest Treasure in Pike Place Market and at Ye Olde Curiosity Shop on the waterfront.</p> <p>"By flooding the market with counterfeit Native American art and craftwork, these crimes cheat the consumer, undermine the economic livelihood of Native American artists, and impair Indian culture," Edward Grace, assistant director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Office of Law Enforcement, said in a news release.</p> <p>Rath and Van Dyke were due to appear in U.S. District Court on Friday afternoon. Their attorneys, federal public defenders Gregory Geist and Vanessa Pai-Thompson, said in an email Friday they did not have any immediate comment on the charges.</p> <p>Authorities said the investigation began when the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, an Interior Department agency that promotes Native art, received complaints that the two were fraudulently holding themselves out as enrolled tribal members.</p> <p>Rath is charged with four counts of misrepresentation of Indian-produced goods, which is punishable by up to five years in prison. Van Dyke faces two counts of the same crime.</p> <p>Rath also faces one misdemeanor count of unlawfully possessing golden eagle parts, and one of unlawfully possessing migratory bird parts.</p> <p>According to charging documents, an employee of Ye Olde Curiosity Shop, which has been in business for more than a century, told investigators that she wrote an artist biography of Rath based on information he provided about his tribal affiliation.</p>

Matthew Steinbrueck, the owner of Raven's Nest Treasure, told investigators that the artists told him they were tribal members and that he believed them, according to the documents. He said he did not knowingly sell counterfeit Indian products.

"I've been doing this on good faith for many years — for more than 30 years," Steinbrueck told The Associated Press on Friday. "Our whole mission is to represent authentic Native art. We've had more than 100 authentic Native artists. I've always just taken their word for it."

He said his family had a long appreciation for American Indian culture, dating to when his great-grandfather adopted a tribal member. Steinbrueck's father, Victor Steinbrueck, an architect credited with helping preserve Pike Place Market and Seattle's historic Pioneer Square neighborhood, brought him up to revere Native culture, he said.

Van Dyke told investigators that it was Steinbrueck's idea to represent his work as Native American.

Steinbrueck denied that, saying Van Dyke appeared to be trying to lessen his own culpability. He called Van Dyke "a fabulous carver" who made art in the style of his wife's Alaska Native tribe, including pendants carved from fossilized mammoth or walrus ivory.

Neither Ye Olde Curiosity Shop nor Raven's Nest has been charged in the case.

Gabriel Galanda, an Indigenous rights attorney in Seattle who belongs to the Round Valley Tribes of Northern California, said that if shops offer products as Native-produced, they should be verifying the heritage of the creators, such as by examining tribal enrollment cards or federal certificates of Indian blood.

"There has to be some diligence done by these galleries," Galanda said.

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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 N. Aurora Ave Seattle businesses: crimes</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://komonews.com/news/local/north-seattle-businesses-along-n-aurora-avenue-say-thefts-crime-surging">https://komonews.com/news/local/north-seattle-businesses-along-n-aurora-avenue-say-thefts-crime-surging</a>
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — After a string of recent break-ins, several North Seattle businesses located along Aurora Avenue said they are fed up with crime and are calling on city officials to do something to help curb illegal behavior.</p> <p>Surveillance video from a camera mounted at Stereo Warehouse captured a man wearing a black hoody who walked casually into the business on Wednesday evening before he brandished a weapon.</p> <p>"I just thought it was a normal customer," worker Gene Decker said, adding that the man flashed a gun before making a threat. "He tells me don't take my hands off the counter or he'll shoot me and my co-worker."</p> <p>Workers said the man fled from the store with an amplifier costing \$2,000. Police said the theft is under investigation, and the suspect was described as 6-feet-3-inches tall and wore gloves during the robbery.</p> <p>Dutton Clark, who owns the store, said North Aurora Avenue shop is being targeted by criminals at a record clip this year.</p> <p>"People running around with hammers, smashing out the windows," he said. "People running out of the door with stuff. We've been here for decades. It's never been like this."</p> <p>Janelle Uribe, owner of 5-Star Auto, a used car lot next door, and said the level of crime and robberies is worsening.</p>



"We can't get away from it (and) it's getting scarier," she said. "it's getting worse. We've had our tow truck stolen. Now we're looking to move out of the city of Seattle."

Officials who work at a teriyaki restaurant nearby said they are still dealing with a break-in from earlier in the week.

It's hard to tell what's fueling this trend, but Clark believes the criminals think they won't be held accountable.

"This is crazy," he said. "if you're a criminal in Seattle, you know that you're not going to be arrested, and you're not going to be prosecuted."

Casey McNerthney, spokesman for the King County Prosecutors' Office, said arrests and prosecutions are happening in these cases, and understands the public wants it to happen more often.

"We're just as frustrated," he said, adding that his office only goes after the felony-level thefts like the one at Stereo Warehouse.

"You have a gun or a knife and pull it on somebody, absolutely that goes to us," he said. "And we will prosecute if we have the evidence."

The rest of the thefts, break-ins or burglary cases go to the city attorney to be prosecuted as low-level misdemeanors. City officials did not immediately respond when asked how many cases have been pursued this year.

The crime has dismayed merchants in the area.

"First thing you learn when your mom's teaching you the facts of life is that you don't steal from people," Clark said. "But here in Seattle it's OK."

Nelson Garcia, owners of a Hispanic foods grocer story on North Aurora Ave. was also victimized.

"They just took the whole register," he said, adding that he installed metal bars to all his windows to obtain another another layer of security. "And it's been really helping us and other businesses."

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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 More gun violence in Seattle: 3 shootings</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://komonews.com/news/local/more-gun-violence-in-seattle-as-police-investigate-trio-of-overnight-shootings">https://komonews.com/news/local/more-gun-violence-in-seattle-as-police-investigate-trio-of-overnight-shootings</a>
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — The Seattle Police Department on Friday was investigating three overnight shootings, including two incidents in which several rounds were fired at the intended targets, one of whom had to be hospitalized for his injuries.</p> <p>One suspect was in custody in connection with the shootings but suspects in the other two incidents remained at large, and police were asking for the public's help with the other cases.</p> <p>Authorities said the first incident occurred at 11 p.m. when a 34-year-old man opened fire in the SoDo neighborhood around 11 p.m. before trying to leave the scene on a Metro bus.</p> <p>The suspect, whose identity was pending, began shooting while at a bus stop, prompting bystanders to call 911.</p> <p>According to investigators, police found the suspect as he was getting on a bus. The man was taken into custody by officers, who found another gun hidden under a seat in addition to the weapon the man had in his pant.</p>

	<p>The suspect, said to be a convicted felon, was booked into the King County Jail on firearms violations. It was not immediately clear if bond has been set in the case.</p> <p>Police said the other incidents also included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shortly after midnight, a 54-year-old man sitting in his car in the 3600 block of S. Adams Street was approached by another man who began firing at the suspect, who was struck several times by the gunfire. Someone in the neighborhood who heard the gunfire found the victim and drove him to Harborview Medical Center for treatment. Information about his condition was pending. Detectives said 30 spent shell casings were found at the scene. Police did not say if the victim knew the suspect or what may have led to the gunfire.</li> <li>• Around 12:30 a.m. and two miles from the second shooting scene, someone opened fire in the 4200 block of S. Willow Street. Police didn't find any eyewitnesses to the shooting but recovered 16 shell casings at the scene. Investigators did not say if a victim from the attack was found.</li> </ul>
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HEADLINE	<b>12/10 Mom charged in 11yr-old fentanyl OD death</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.q13fox.com/news/port-orchard-mom-charged-with-homicide-after-11-year-old-daughter-dies-of-fentanyl-overdose">https://www.q13fox.com/news/port-orchard-mom-charged-with-homicide-after-11-year-old-daughter-dies-of-fentanyl-overdose</a>
GIST	<p>PORT ORCHARD, Wash. - A Port Orchard woman has been charged with controlled substance homicide after her 11-year-old daughter died of a fentanyl overdose in May.</p> <p>On May 6, Stephanie Melton and another women were smoking fentanyl in their home. Melton also had her 11-year-old daughter smoke with her.</p> <p>Court documents say Melton and her daughter started smoking Percocet pills that night and that the child had taken multiple hits.</p> <p>According to court documents, Melton told the housemate that "she was the mother" and that she would "rather have her [daughter] do it at home rather than do it on the street or somewhere she can't be watched."</p> <p>Later that night, she told officers that she thought her daughter looked like she was sleeping in a chair. When she approached her daughter, she said her lips were blue. Melton said she tried to wake her daughter up, realized she wasn't breathing, and pulled her onto the floor and began CPR.</p> <p>The second person in the house called 911 around 1 p.m. that day.</p> <p>The following day, Melton asked another person to clear out the garbage cans in case investigators were sent to the residence, according to court documents.</p> <p>The 11-year-old was officially declared brain-dead. An autopsy determined shed died of acute fentanyl toxicity.</p> <p>Melton was charged with controlled substances homicide, which is defined as a "person who unlawfully delivers a controlled substance or which a controlled substance is subsequently used by the person to whom it was delivered, resulting in the death of that user."</p>
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